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A STRANGE TEMPTATION

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BY

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AUTHOR OF

"A WAKING," "MR. NOBODY," "RECOLLECTIONS OF A COUNTRY DOCTOR,"

"GODWYN'S ORDEAL," "PARTED LIVES,"

"LADY HAZLETON'S CONFESSION,"

ETC., ETC.

One frequently hears a story of John Bradford quoted with approval, in which it is said that, seeing a condemned criminal on his way to Tyburn Tree, he exclaimed, "There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford." Many, perhaps most, have not yet reached that level, but Pharisaically condemn those who have succumbed to forces and temptations from which their judges have been free. Few are those who understand that a better and truer utterance of the Puritan worthy would have been: "There goes one for whose state John Bradford is partly responsible!"

JOTTINGS FROM JAIL.

IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. I

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A STRANGE TEMPTATION.

Part I.

CHAPTER I.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

"WAKE up, and don't be so down in the mouth; you know the manager will be ready to swear if everything doesn't go right, with such a good house as it is to-night. Why are you shivering? *I* think it is hot," said the one girl to the other, who was shaking off a peculiar appendage intended to represent the scales on a mermaid's tail, and emerging in a costume suitable to a *danseuse*.

Polly Smith could not think what was the matter with her cousin, for Azalea had long ago got over

the feeling of being ashamed of the dress, which was high above the calves, but to-day the shame of it seemed to have come back to her. "*He* will be there," she whispered. And, there could be no mistake about it, her pretty white teeth were chattering with terror. "And you know what he threatened, if I didn't listen to him, or take his presents."

"Don't be afraid," said the stronger Polly, sarcastically; "there are plenty of such threatenings for poor girls like us, who try to keep ourselves straight. If we were to listen to 'em we should never get through the day's work. Let him hiss if he will; there are lots of others to clap; they will be mad about you, as usual, if they have any taste."

"But I don't know what has come over me. I feel bad and nervous to-night. I'm thinking that mother wouldn't have liked it."

"Thank goodness, it won't trouble her where she's gone, and we orphans, both of us, with no other means of livelihood," said the more practical Polly, hurriedly,

knowing that little time could be wasted in such talk.

For already there was a sound of trampling of feet, as the theatre was filling again with the men who had gone out during the interval between the acts, to lounge round the bar, where the barkeeper, resplendent with a diamond pin in his dazzling shirt-front, mixed "cocktails" for the spruce, frizzle-headed clerks, or the rough-bearded fellows to whom mining was a profession, and who had settled down for a time in "'Frisco," as the City of the Golden Gate is lovingly called by Western men.

It was not the beautiful and wealthy San Francisco of the latest improvements, but the "'Frisco" of decivilized man, fond of rotatory motion in merry-go-rounds, of ballad-concert ditties with slangy phraseology, with a glossary of his own, not always refined. Theoretically these bronzed-faced men, transatlantic or colonial, with rhymes about ranches and cañons, had an honest disdain for all the "airs" and "frills" of youthful women. But these novelties amused as well as tantalized them, and when some of

the older men had to seek a week's amusement in the town, which they had once known as not much more than a collection of cotton tents on sand heaps, they would never have thought of strolling into "The California," or "Baldwin," but preferred to smoke their pipes, or chew navy plug while they gaped at the cheap melodrama or meretricious pantomime of the "Adelphi." Only a Chinese theatre, where "tricks that were vain" were performed nightly, which puzzled the longest heads for an explanation, could vie with the sensationalism catered for by the manager of the "Adelphi." A part of the programme was the noisy music of the band, and the fiddles, cornets, and 'cellos were still performing as Polly, a little scared at her cousin's appearance, made her final appeal.

"Oh, you know that is ridiculous; you *couldn't* be nervous. Dancing with you is not only easy, it is a real pleasure; you have always told me you enjoyed it. Do you think I would ever have let you do it, dear, if it had been the other way?" she cried, with

a sudden access of affection. "Don't you know that I would have worked for the two of us?" she added, excitedly, while the admiring old mulatto woman, who was just then somewhat unnecessarily applying dabs of rouge to Polly's already rosy cheeks, exclaimed, "There she is, for all the world as if she was de mammy, though she's as pooty herself, de honey! Hard to say which is de pootiest."

Aunt Sally, the "dresser," said this with the grimace of a monkey, occasioned by the fact that her mouth was full of pins. In her anxiety not to swallow them, her words were not distinct, and the cousins, who were used to such "buttering," paid no attention to them whatever.

It was hard, indeed, to say which was "the pootiest," as Aunt Sally expressed it, jogging her dark head from side to side approvingly, as she put the finishing touches to Polly's dress, plaiting the silk between her old fingers and handling it as if she loved it.

Both the girls belonged to respectable families, which

had emigrated from the old country in need of the very necessities of existence; and both having been deprived of their parents early, and thrown on their own resources, had grown up like aquatic flowers, piercing through the slime and mud of their surroundings, throwing out leaves of delicate green, and pure white corollas, in spite of the foul waters in which their roots were embedded.

Both had eyes large and bright, set like jewels between long, sweeping brows, but Azalea's were blue, while Polly's were grey—a blackish grey by candle-light. Azalea's hair was several shades lighter than her cousin's, waving back from the temples, which had that look of fragility peculiar to delicate health. The scarlet of Polly's lips, which no paint could enhance, contrasted with the fainter red of her cousin's, at times so pale as to be scarcely distinguishable from the paler skin of the upper lip, but daintily curved so as to display the white teeth. Polly's teeth were larger, and the texture of her skin was firmer and more warmly white. Her

round, pliant waist and well-developed bust contrasted with Azalea's slender proportions. But both girls were about the same height, both had well-formed hands and feet, and both had shining hair.

They looked like sisters more than cousins, and the manager of the travelling company with which they acted, and which was now making its tour in the English Colonies and the United States, had made a hit when he advertised them as "The Sisters Vere and Violet Clavering." Perhaps his acumen was nearly as great when he associated them with a little piece calculated in its opening act to set all the "corner boys" grinning, whilst the concluding passages appealed almost as strongly to that portion of the people, who could live securely and enjoy polished society in San Francisco without fear of desperadoes—people sociable and merry, if extravagant, loving to be amused and ready to pay a high price for their amusement.

But in a city which prided itself on its amalgamation of nations, and in which it was necessary to cater for

tastes as various as those of the Chinaman with a love for spectacular entertainment, and those of the sons of great English families who had abdicated birth in favour of riches, no manager could afford to be fastidious. What would have been the good of providing high art for the uncultured specimens of nerve and muscle who constituted the greater part of the audience, who had no time for poetry, and who were accustomed to the coarsest mental diet? The Venus of Milo would not have appeared so lovely to the majority of the men who lounged into this theatre as a third-rate opera dancer—the Laocoon not so admirable as a couple of prize-fighters—and Handel's choruses would have compared unfavourably with a music-hall song.

An audience composed mostly of men, some of whom had once learnt Latin and Greek, whilst others rejoiced in such cognomens as Horsebeef Bill, Bulldog Jack, Donkey Gulch, or Puppy Gentleman, was proverbially difficult to cater for. The stalwart, grey-shirted, knee-booted men, who had resigned themselves

to exile, perhaps for a lifetime, and had ceased to correspond with friends in England, were not likely to find fault with scenery which was coarsely painted, and decorations which would have seemed ridiculously tawdry, judged by the new advance in decorative and scenic art, in almost any provincial town in Great Britain. The "piece" had been adapted from a fairy tale of Hans Christian Andersen's, with such lavish alterations that Andersen himself would certainly not have recognized his handiwork, and the scenery of the first act was portentous and astounding.

"Looks as if 'twere that ar darned old Pacific gettin' inter one o' his towerin' passions; he's a good fellow when he's hisself, but he drinks a deal too much," remarked one of the observers, probably with reference to stories about storms in that neighbourhood, in which the sea, in its fearful wrath, had driven ships high and dry on the beach, chasing the escaping occupants far into the sandhills, and dashing spars and rigging after them.

But the speciality in this stormy sea was calculated to tickle the fancy. For here and there between the rough waves, which were managed in a primitive fashion, with clumsy machinery, the heads and shoulders of mermen and mermaids popped up and down like those of so many Jacks-in-the-box, the inhuman creatures gloating over the sufferings of a handsome Prince, whose yacht was in danger of being wrecked on the rocks. One pretty little mermaid alone was touched with pity for the alarms of Prince Charming and his retinue, endeavouring to save the helpless mortals from the turbulence of the ocean.

The second scene was still more remarkable. In a rocky cave, strewn with sea-shells and curious creatures of the deep, an old witch of gigantic proportions was sitting muttering over her cauldron. The little mermaid (Vere Clavering) having forsaken her own people, and encountered their enmity, for love of the Prince, and having heard that the witch was able, with her spells, to transform her into mortal shape,

had sought her in despair, ready to brave any curse in pursuit of her wishes. The sublime must ever be blended with the ridiculous, and nothing but the girl's pathetic expression, with her peculiarly ethereal cast of beauty, could have made the representation of the mermaid anything but comic on a nearer view. The black-bearded witch, with her weird and bloated features, murmuring her incantations over the fire, diverted the attention from the fact that the girl, whose delicate limbs were encased in a tail with fishy scales, could not stand properly upright, but had to be floated in on a slide, hidden in its turn by a huge nautilus shell. The scales covered her to the waist, where a pink silk bodice, almost entirely concealed by her long, floating, blonde tresses, completed the effect, which was ludicrous and impossible.

But nothing could destroy the native grace of the performer, who was shy and gentle, and looked the part to perfection, because she was a little frightened. And the men and women in the pit, who were eating

sweetmeats and fruits, thought only of the cruelty of the witch who decreed that, when the little mermaid assumed human form, she should be dumb till she should succeed in engaging the affections of the Prince. The tender vibrations of the musical voice had been heard, pleading in vain against the hardness of the verdict, which further doomed her to the penalty of death should she fail to win success. She had taken the horrible decoction, which was to turn her into a mortal, into her trembling hand—the hand was long and narrow, and the fingers tapered; it showed delicacy of constitution—she had consented to drink it, and had fallen into a deep sleep.

And now in the interval the people were waiting for her reappearance in the form of a woman. The muffled sounds of the stamping of feet showed that they were beginning to get impatient. The scene-shifters had changed the scenes, and the actor who took the part of the Prince had already emerged from his dressing-room, and knocked noisily at ~~the~~

door, bidding Polly and her cousin to "look sharp."

"It is time for you to go on—you mustn't wait a moment longer—I'll come—I shan't be long," said Mary Smith, giving one more encouraging glance to her cousin.

* * * * *

The third act had begun. The inferior orchestra had ceased, and the lights through the opal-tinted glasses which had been casting a subdued, almost sickly, hue over the theatre were turned on to their fullest extent. The wine-bibbers had returned from crowding round the bars, and had taken their places in the pit; the breath of some of them reeking from fumes of whisky, or stale tobacco. Their eyes were stolidly fixed on the stage, for now the treat of the evening was about to commence—had they not come to see Vere Clavering dance?

It seemed to the poor, trembling little *danseuse*, who lay prone with her eyes closed—apparently asleep—on

the stage, as if through her own shut eyelids she could see those hosts of other eyes—everywhere—everywhere—the eyes of men. Men of all classes, and perhaps of all nations, for it needed no knowledge of the English language to come and see a pretty girl dance.

And now for the first time in the evening the private boxes began to fill with the *élite*, who had disdained to put in an appearance at the earlier and more meretricious portion of the proceedings. Amongst them, in a stage-box, was a well-known exquisite who often frequented this theatre, dressed, as he fondly supposed, in the height of European fashion, though his war-paint and feathers would not have deceived people in London or Paris, both necktie and dress-suit being a little out of date. It was he who had often flung bouquets to Vere Clavering, and who had lately offered her jewellery, which she had refused. He had pretensions as an art critic, and opinions which no one ever contradicted, seeing that the other men

had little time to give to such subjects. When this Beau Nash of the ceremonies applauded there followed a storm of stamping and clapping. When he hissed other people hissed. It was almost sufficient for them to watch the movements of his lips.

He now settled himself in the front of the box, and surveyed the scene through his opera-glass. It was better painted than the former ones:—a forest scene, with graceful old oaks and wild flowers in the foreground, whilst English elms with their characteristic foliage melted away in the blueness of the distance. It was curious in other respects, for the Californian painter had introduced the “redwoods” and a few Monterey cypresses, with creeping vines and some rare exotics, apparently unaware of the incongruity.

Underneath one of the trees lies Vere Clavering, no longer the “little mermaid,” but not as yet recovered from the deep sleep into which the witch’s draught had thrown her. The prince enters and views her with astonishment. He wakes her, and takes her

by the hand, trying to make her speak, and give him some explanation of the loneliness of her position. The *danseuse* arises, dazzling in her beauty, and glittering in the spangled robes, which have hitherto been concealed beneath the scales of the mermaid's dress. She is the attraction of the evening. The soft, blue tint of the eyes, relieved by irises which are almost black, with the pale, luminous hair, more like moonlight than sunlight, the little feet, and the childlike air, give her the appearance of a delicate china figure. A motherly woman might have observed with a sigh that the airy effect was sadly increased by the thinness of the limbs, which had once been supple and round; and the mulatto woman, who had dressed her, could have added the information of how impossible she had found it to heighten with rouge the hectic spots, which glowed on the ivory whiteness of her cheeks.

The prince finds that she is speechless. She motions to him with her arms—her delicate hands. He does not understand her. And then she begins to dance.

Heine's *mot*, that dancing is praying with one's feet, seems to have some meaning as she glides along in this poetry of motion. When she ceases there is a storm of clapping, through which an ear quickened by anxiety could distinguish the faintest hiss. The feet of the dancer waver, but she takes courage. The prince again takes her by the hand, speaks to her kindly, and offers to shelter her in his palace. He calls her his little foundling, and joy overtakes her. The dance becomes more rapid as she attempts to express her gratitude. Her little feet seem scarcely to touch the ground—she floats rather than walks.

In the second scene the prince is at the door of his palace. He is leading the dumb girl, and presents her to his *fiancée*, who is waiting to meet him in the park in the evening light. The likeness and contrast between the supposed sisters strikes the lookers-on, for the princess is Violet Clavering, magnificently dressed in some rich brocade, interwoven with silver, on which a coloured light is turned to imitate the

setting sun, till it sparkles like cloth of gold. Violet's dignified appearance, with firm neck, well set on her shoulders, rounded arms, and stately carriage, hair of a red chestnut, and eyes a shade darker than her cousin's, contrasts with the ethereal appearance of the dancer. She is gracious to the foundling, but the joy of the deaf and dumb girl, when she approaches her, is once more turned to anguish. She remembers the time when she implored the witch to help her in bartering her all for the hope of being human, and, cursed with her granted prayer, she attempts in vain to make her affection known. The applause was apt to be great at this crisis, when—deprived as she was of the faculty of speech—the unknown girl had to express by her dancing alone all her feelings of fear, hope, and entreaty. But the applause was fainter than usual, and again interrupted by a hiss, for the feet of the dancer seemed to flag; the beauty, the coquetry, and even the despair were somehow less bewildering than usual.

In the last scene the marriage is about to take place, and the dumb girl again appears as the bridal procession is preparing to form. She detains the bridegroom, who is fascinated, as if bewitched, by the mysterious being, now beckoning, now entreating, while she is still unable to deliver the message she has to give him. Her agility, her caprices, as she appears for a moment, and then vanishes into the background, succeed for a little while in directing his attention even from the bride. It was the crucial moment in which the poor little dancer's triumph had been wont to take the house by storm.

The clapping and stamping re-commenced, but the hiss was again heard, and this time it was supported by other hisses, unmistakeably repeated from the stage-box. In the pit two or three men stood up full of indignant protest. Such things before now had led to encounters with fists. The dancer became aware of it, and stood uncertain, with trembling limbs. Terribly fatigued as she was by the efforts she had already

made, oppressed by the panting of her breath, and fearing to lose her control over her muscles, she made the fatal mistake of glancing upwards at the boxes. The man she feared and hated was there, and not only he, but his companions. He was continually explaining to those who turned him into ridicule behind his back that, to him, the dance was a serious thing, an exhibition of Art; he had a way of making himself disagreeable, but, as he was rich and a good shot, it was not wise to take him too seriously. Those who differed from him shrugged their shoulders and said nothing, but he had a following of his own, and it was easy to see that others who thought themselves dandies, and whose costume and ways were in almost absurd contrast to the slouching figures and rough clothing of the miners, took their cue from him, following their leader even in his hisses, so that the accumulated hiss made a volume of sound.

Once more the dancer was overcome by the idea that hundreds of eyes were staring at her from everywhere—

eyes from the pit, the stalls, and the boxes—eyes even from the footlights, and eyes from the poor musicians, who were staring from the orchestra! She was unable any longer to bear the hungry stare of those cruel eyes, or the bewildering glare of the footlights. She heard nothing but the hissing, and believed herself a failure. Cold drops of perspiration stood like beads on her ivory brow. A laboured cough burst from her chest, but she still continued to dance, looking entreatingly at the audience, as if to ask them why they hissed her when she had done her best, ill and weak, to minister to their amusement. Her movements were still graceful, but the dance became slower and slower, as the shame of it overwhelmed her. And suddenly, at the important moment, she wavered—her limbs gave way beneath her—the triumphant and hopeful child had disappeared in the suffering woman.

She had fainted, fainted even beneath the roses and camellias which her admirers had heaped down upon her, to lessen the effect of her ill success.

A few minutes afterwards, when the curtain had fallen, and Polly was bending over her, chafing her hands, and whispering encouraging words into her ears, she refused to be comforted, refused even at first to be moved from the boards, on which she crouched exhausted, hiding her altered face and dishevelled hair.

“I haven’t got it in me any longer—I can never, never do it again. That man hissed me because I would not take his presents, or answer his letters. It puts me in the power of those sort of people. I always hated it, and I can never do it now,” she said, loud enough to be heard by the supers and scene-shifters, who were lingering near her, half in pity and half in curiosity.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER THE PLAY.

"IT was very well when he only threw me the flowers; but if it was all to come over again, it would be exactly the same. I *couldn't* accept the jewels; you know we made up our minds it wouldn't do. I want to get out of it. I wish I could go away to the ends of the earth," explained Azalea, in tones which were weak from fretting and faintness, when the girls were alone in their ill-furnished lodgings that night.

"It wouldn't have mattered if he hadn't fancied himself one of the dramatic critics," said Polly, with a shrug, keeping to herself the reflection that they two had made up their minds to a good deal which seemed

to be impossible in life. "It *was* unfortunate to have offended him, but you couldn't help it, darling; it was his fault for being so persistent; you must try to forget it."

"But what will you do? I cannot live on *you*. Perhaps I can take in needlework, or give lessons in dancing?"

"Don't trouble to bother about it to-night," said Polly, twining her arms closely round her cousin. "I have a little money saved, and 'Big Ben' will perhaps help me to make enough for both of us."

"'Big Ben' is a host in himself; he can do a lot with the manager; but if Mr. Twining should turn upon all of *you* for my shortcomings?"

"He didn't burst out on us to-night, though it was really too provoking—a sort of thing which is sure to be bad for the company. It was really one of the best houses we have ever had. Now, if the manager had stormed and lost his temper, I should hardly have been surprised, but he was pretty good-tem-

pered," admitted Polly, frankly. She would hardly have spoken out so plainly had she known that Azalea's faintness was no mere transient attack.

"Oh, darling, why did you not tell me?" she cried in her alarm, as the cough became incessant on the following morning, and it was too evident that the effort which had been made on the previous evening accounted for its increased severity. "Did you think I would have let you go if I had known? You had better put a mustard plaster on your chest."

"Yes; the disfigurement will not matter *now*," answered Lea, as she sat up in bed, propped by the pillows. "Are you going out, Polly? Don't stay in this close room. And if you *happened* to be going out, it struck me that perhaps you could get me a few more of those glycerine lozenges?—they did me so much good last time."

She turned away with a wan smile from the intent, questioning look which the other girl fixed upon her. There was no blind to the room, and the morning

sunshine fell full on the loveliness of the blonde head, bringing out everything into clear relief, from the bistre circles beneath the eyes, which told of want of sleep, to the delicate down on the cheeks and on the edges of the temples, where the fair curls were pushed back.

The unspotted purity of the face lent a beauty which would otherwise scarcely have belonged to it when the morning light revealed its haggardness. For the cheeks had lost their curves, the lips were dry and colourless, and the black pupils, which had been dilated, giving a brilliancy to the eyes, in the excitement of the previous evening, were now contracted to points like pins, while the eyes themselves looked pale and red-rimmed.

A presentiment, sharp as an electric shock, darted through Polly's mind that it was possible for her friend and companion to be past the stage when glycerine lozenges would be of any avail.

"What is the matter with me this morning," she

asked herself, impatiently, "that I have such a lot of queer thoughts haunting my brain like a set of wretched imps sent to torment me? I must sweep them all away, or *I* shall be good for nothing."

The air was clear and revivifying as she went out for her daily purchases—not forgetting the glycerine lozenges, only to be purchased at a store in Market Street—but the Kobolds which continued to haunt her brain were not to be swept away by any amount of good air. The girl's own state of health was simply magnificent, and more than one man turned to look at her as she walked with rapid, elastic steps, the colour mantling in her cheeks as she glanced with admiration at the brilliant colouring of the Bay filled with hundreds of ships and sailing-vessels of all descriptions—all busy—all alive! On other occasions this vivid sense of life would have stirred the blood in her veins, and she would have felt as if she could cry aloud for joy as she inhaled deep breaths of the fresh, pure sea air. But what was the use of feeling as if it were good to

be alive; or delightful to catch a glimpse in the clear atmosphere of the Golden Gate itself—that little, narrow line of blue between the northern and southern peninsulas, connecting the bay with the ocean?

As she passed the Palace Hotel, on her way from Montgomery Street into Market Street, that sort of electric shock accompanied by an unaccustomed sickness of the heart came upon her again, and her steps became slow and languid. Once more she grew a little frightened as she recalled those unnaturally deep stains under Azalea's eyes, and the pallid tint of the face which by candle-light would be ivory white with hectic colour on the cheeks.

A sudden resolution came upon her; she would ask the landlady of their lodging-house to recommend a clever doctor. There were lots of doctors in "'Frisco," and lots of people died, as Polly reflected with a pang, remembering how "Big Ben," her lover—he who acted the witch and had received his nickname from the fact that he, on occasions, could sing a good bass

song, priding himself on a "timbre" and volume of sound which was enough to smash any ordinary window-glass—how "Big Ben" had once suggested that the men and the girls should take a holiday by driving out to one of the cemeteries, where all respectable citizens owned a "lot" which they were fond of showing to their friends—the duty of "inspection" being a sort of treat. To hear "Big Ben" talk, you would have jumped to the conclusion that every desperado in "'Frisco," or its suburbs, kept his private graveyard in which to bury the numerous victims of his unerring sixshooter, and Polly had been thankful when "Little Dick" (as the man who acted the Prince was called, in contradistinction to "Big Ben") knocked the expedition on the head, and declared it to be in bad taste. "Big Ben" was an American; but Dick was a debased victim of the effete despotisms of Europe, and though he was an "out-and-outer" in the way of Radicalism, and proposed in some vague fashion to reform the old country, he did not relish

the conversation of his companion, who talked pleasantly of being deposited himself some day,—carefully enshrined in what he called a “casket”—in his “lot,” when that unfailing marksman Death should “let daylight,” in some way unknown at present, through him, and cause him to “pass in his checks.”

Death was busy enough, as Polly reflected, in “’Frisco,” as well as everywhere else, and somehow the thought of it turned her cold and sick. She had the impulse of fighting with it, and warding it off with that determination and strength which comes to healthy, vigorous youth.

She called in the doctor. He came the following morning, but she had no intention of being alarmed by his dolorous professional diagnosis. Indeed, she thought it better not to question him, lest he should be tempted to say horrible things to her. She believed it to be a part of every doctor’s programme to humbug his patients by prophesying bad things, that he might take all the credit of getting them out of the

hobble. "Little Dick" had told her so; he had once had a fever, and the doctors had so humbugged him. She had made up her mind that Dick, who was shrewd and cautious, having a much keener eye than she had herself for the humbugging propensities of her fellow-creatures, must be in the right of it, and she determined to cling to Dick's opinion.

Nevertheless, when the kind, old, keen-looking, grey-haired man, with benevolent eyes beneath his overhanging, penthouse brows, began his careful examination of Lea's case, she was more than once shaken in her resolution. Once she began to say, "Do you——?" and broke off in her questioning, feeling that she had only made a fool of herself. She stood by the bedside, trying to master her nervousness and foolish excitability, vexed with herself for the irritable impatience which she found so difficult to restrain.

"Had you not better sound her lungs?" she had asked, rather unnecessarily, when he entered the room, flushing with anxiety as she ventured to make the

suggestion, and then became aware of her own foolishness, because she could not bear to see the old man's great, powerful hand pressed against her darling's delicate back, to hear the sound of his taps, or to watch the expression of his wrinkled face, scored with the lines of thought as he stopped to listen.

"You are hurting her," she felt inclined to exclaim, and then turned away, ashamed of herself. For the look in the kindly physician's face struck like a shot through her heart.

"How was it you allowed her to go on dancing when she caught this heavy cold?" he asked, evading that other question which she had determined not to put, but which it needed little skill to read in her anxious face. "How was it you did not call in medical aid before?"

Polly did not answer. She knew in her secret heart that the very urgency of her fears had made her unpractical, and the very strength of her will in keeping a spectre at bay had kept her from asking anyone to

examine Lea. Nothing more had been said in the presence of the patient, but Polly's tears had increased as she noticed that the old man looked at her cousin almost tenderly, when he helped to lay her back gently on the pillows. He seemed to have been touched himself, rough as his appearance was in many ways, by the look in the sick girl's great, beseeching eyes.

Was it the fear of *death*—the same fear which had been haunting herself—which was so visibly to be seen in those eyes, with the imploring gaze of a wounded gazelle? Polly asked herself the question with a shudder, as she followed the doctor down the stairs of the tall house with different rooms let out to various families. The noise of children's voices with the general stir of life, the odour of decayed vegetables, stale tobacco and beer, common to such crowded human dwellings, struck Polly as it had not done before, when the two stood together in the narrow hall able to talk, for the first time, at the open door leading into the street.

Then the doctor said abruptly, "You had better move as quickly as you can out of *this*. Take quiet lodgings as soon as possible—in the country air, or—what do you say to Oaklands? There are small houses in Oaklands if it is near enough for your work. Rest and quiet are absolutely necessary."

Polly simply nodded her head. Afterwards she had taken herself to task for standing like a simpleton, unable to explain that the salaries allowed to the members of a travelling company were terribly limited, and that though she had tried to be especially careful in choosing a bedroom on her own account—ever since Azalea had caught one of her severest colds after being put into damp sheets—it seemed to her impossible to get good and healthy accommodation. These damp sheets and newly-papered rooms had never hurt Polly, but, as "Big Ben" said, they "played the devil" with others who had not iron constitutions.

She tried to nerve herself to listen to the further advice. It seemed that good air was needed, tonics

and plenty of good, tempting food, and that doctoring could do little or nothing. But what could she understand of the tall talk which followed? Possibly he had his own reasons for parrying anything definite and putting her off, as it seemed to her, with vague generalities about the thickening at the base of the lungs, the state of the tissues, and the condition of the blood. When he came to the long words "tubercular bacilli" she again nodded her head, feeling like an idiotic hypocrite for pretending to know his meaning, when she had not the faintest comprehension of it.

Possibly the fencing might have gone on longer on both sides—he afraid to be too brusque with her, and she terrified to ask for the truth—had not a chord of sympathy been suddenly touched between them by the fact that when Polly pulled out a piece of gold from her slender little purse, he put his hands in his pockets and sturdily refused to take it.

Then the girl, biting her lips and trying to swallow down her tears, cried suddenly—too distracted to

know what she was asking, and too terrified to be logical—"If I do *all* that you tell me—and if we move to other lodgings, at *once*—will you promise me, *promise* that she will get well again."

She caught hold of him in her excitement, and he, gently loosing his coat from her touch, said in a lower voice,

"My dear, is it for *me* to kill or to make alive? The issues of life and death are not with men like us."

Afterwards, when he drove off in his buggy to visit his other patients, he found it difficult to get that unusual vision away from his eyes, of a girl who looked like a mad woman, her fingers clutching at his coat as she cried wildly,

"Promise me, *promise* me."

More than once he found his spectacles dimmed and had to take them off and wipe them. Then he said to himself, with no unkindly thought,

"These actresses are queer people, always intense and exaggerative."

CHAPTER III.

LOVE GRAPPLING WITH DEATH.

POLLY had never heard of a celebrated picture by one of our greatest artists, in which Love, with its ineffectual efforts and little hands—with muscles overstrained from useless effort—is endeavouring to bar the passage, and stop the striding walk of Death. But the same impulse was upon her as she went wearily up the stairs holding on to the balusters for support, with a sensation that her arms were nerveless and yet that her beloved *should* not die.

The doctor in his talk had alluded to a Higher Power, but Polly—though she believed in all sorts of talismans and superstitions—had no intention of appeal-

ing to that Higher Power. A sensation that it would be mean to appeal to the Great Unseen on account of her own selfish interests, whilst for years she had put all such thoughts on one side, was as deterrent as the recollection that she knew nothing at all of such subjects. In her mere struggle for the necessities of existence, and in the urgent needs of her busy life there had not been a moment to spare for the consideration of such topics. And yet she felt weak as an infant, in trying to ward off the approach of the horrible thing whose pestiferous breath was already close upon her, in its attempt to snatch away her treasure.

Her sense of protection for Lea made her waver for an instant, and wonder if there was no minister in the whole of San Francisco who could help her with his prayers. Then she thought how Ben would laugh at her, if she sent for such "cattle," and reminded herself how she had never believed in the use of those sort of people. A minister would only come

and preach, reproach Lea, as some of them had reproached her once before, with the wickedness of her profession, and then she would be worse. No, Azalea had evidently guessed more about her present illness than she had chosen to say to her; she was, perhaps, alarmed beyond measure—seized with the fear of death herself, and trying to put it away from her. Good God—if Polly could only get her darling out into the country, into pure, fresh air where medicine would not be needed—but she would have to consult with her lover first.

Her lover! How horrible it was to be tied in such a fashion, and to be tacked on to a sort of caravan, a menagerie of strange animals in which people could not be left behind, even to be allowed time properly to get through their dying without apologizing to the manager.

She recalled the days when she had first been left alone with Lea—terribly isolated in a strange country to which they had emigrated with two elder people, a widow and widower who were brother and sister—Lea's

mother who was already sickening with consumption and ordered out to a more equable climate, and Polly's father who had afterwards fallen a victim to an accident. They had been living pretty comfortably till the dead body of George Smith had been brought home on a stretcher; and then there was an interim, during which the two girls of fourteen and sixteen had to move into cheaper quarters, and to struggle for their daily bread.

They were sinking into the lowest depths. Polly recalled even now with horror the squalor of little Bourke Street, the evil-looking, ugly backs of the houses, the women with harsh, quarrelsome voices standing at the doorways, the oaths of the men, the vicious atmosphere, the drinking. Thank goodness, they were not obliged any longer to live in a hell like that—but she could never forget that it was Azalea's pretty talent for dancing, in which she had always excelled at the Academy where the two girls had been taught, which rescued them from the neces-

sity of living upon the profits made by button-holing or mending shirts. Since then, with faithful Ben as a kind of protection—after all, he had been a good sort of Newfoundland dog—the existence of the two girls had at least been tolerable. But Azalea had been all in all to her. Polly recalled her little endearing ways, and how, in spite of ill health, she had borne with the constant grumblings of the girl who was older and should have set an example, and how she had never joined in declaiming against the wretchedness of their lot.

For the last year or so Polly had almost ceased to rail at Fate. The sweet patience of her companion in misfortune had not only modified her impatience, but the high spirits, inseparable from a perfect state of physical health, had inflated her like a prosperous wind, carrying her along without resistance. In spite of the wear and tear, the constant knocking about, and the indifferent salaries which were supposed to be good enough for women—there was no doubt of

the fact that Polly had managed to enjoy her life.

All this must come to an end now—and when she was alone again she would succumb to the old attacks of blackest despondency and rail against the cruelty of her fate. Cruelty, yes, it was cruel—the whole world was cruel—she should never be callous enough to bear it! A sense of pity not only for her cousin but for all the suffering women who were represented in her, swept over her and made her angry. At that moment she could not only have shaken her fist in the face of the world, but if there had been a Revolution, such as “Little Dick” liked to rave of, she could have stood red-handed at a barricade, or have thrown in her lot with the petroleuses. Anything to avenge herself on a society which had driven her father into exile, deprived her aunt of the necessities fit for a weak state of health, and forced a delicate girl, with the seeds of hereditary disease, to dance for the people’s pleasure till she was ready to drop and die.

Polly, when she had settled her invalid to an early

sleep that night, comforting her with all sorts of impromptu fibs, set out, with unusual bitterness in her heart, to confer with Ben, on the subject of her change of schemes for the future. It was an added drop of gall to her cup that Ben would probably be furious, and that the manager might possibly endeavour to bind her to her bargain. For already his generosity had been somewhat tried, by the necessity of removing "The Little Mermaid" for a time from the boards, till some other *danseuse* was sufficiently trained to take Azalea's part, and it would be hard upon him to ask him to part with Polly too.

Then what were they to live upon? Polly had not saved enough to keep them for longer than a few weeks. Azalea's cough was less incessant; already it seemed as if the prescription, which had been made up at a druggist's store, was beginning to do her good, but she was very tired and breathless. She would evidently need much nourishment, and Polly's brain went round when she asked herself how on earth all

this nourishment was to be procured, or how they were to exist when the slender purse was exhausted. Oh, the curse of poverty, the hardness and wickedness of the disproportion between human lots!

With the instinct of a wounded animal she sought her way through the narrower streets, feeling, for the moment, a sort of sympathy for the weary and poverty-stricken creatures who had but one resource—drink—and who were crowding round a saloon which had been facetiously called the “Peep of Day”—but which it would have been wiser to have nicknamed the “Mouth of Hell.” Then she had a sudden revulsion of feeling, for the sight of the mist within, dimming the plate-glass windows, caused by the fumes of the whisky, the smoke of the tobacco, and the breath of the men who were crowded together over their cups, with the sound of their oaths and noisy mirth, filled her with a loathing idea of the horrors of the place. She instinctively crossed over on the other side of the pavement, thinking how Ben and Dick would laugh

at her for being so suddenly squeamish, though Ben had warned her against wandering into the Chinese quarter, or that resort of thieves and cut-throats known as the "Barbary coast."

The traditions of Polly's life had made her brave as a boy—Ben had even taught her how to handle a "Derringer" in cases of emergency—but her "people" had been accustomed for generations to gentler modes of life, and there were occasions when heredity would suddenly assert itself.

"If I could only get away from it all!" she cried passionately to herself, wondering how it could be possible for refined and delicate ladies to spend their time, as she heard they did, in ministering to the poor in dirty and disgusting surroundings. "I should like to have nothing but pretty things about me and never to see anything horrid again as long as I live," she added wildly, as she gazed at the backyards of the shoddy houses, the flues and the dirty chimneys, only redeemed by the brilliant stars shining in the clear atmosphere of the sky.

CHAPTER IV.

POLLY ACTS HER PART.

POLLY calculated her time. She knew when the play would be over, and when Ben and his companions would be taking their supper together, at an eating-house in the neighbourhood. One or two of these little suppers had been specially arranged before the company took its departure for Australia.

“Little Dick” who was like the Pacific, and drank more than was good for him, though he never touched water, was apt to get elevated as these suppers proceeded. The little man believed himself to be all suppressed force. He was everything which was fearful when in his revolutionary moods—a Nihilist, a con-

spirator, a regicide. He had been more than once compared to Marat, and rather liked the comparison. But his language became adulatory whenever he referred to women. Constant allusions to flowers and birds, eked out by stilted similes were supposed to be suitable to them. He would have explained that he either approached them in the language of poetry or talked down to their level as if they were children. He looked like a frog trying to inflate himself and emulate the bull, as he stood by Ben's side, glass in hand, haranguing the company, just as Polly entered the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, confronting the other actors who interrupted him with laughing, singing and whistling, "an unparalleled misfortune has happened to us. We are suddenly deprived of the help of one whose Terpsichorean successes shed a lustre over our performances. For just as Miss Vere Clavering had reached the apex of her success, and was enthroned on a dizzy height from which there seemed

little else to covet, she is hurled into the depths by unseen forces."

He had got so far when he seemed in some mysterious way to be collared by "Big Ben," who having had enough of his "chin-music," touched him lightly on the shoulder forcing him to sit down, and rising to his own full height of six foot two, appealed in a massive voice, slightly hoarse from emotion—if not from cheap champagne—to the fellow-feeling amongst men and women in their profession, which made it a notorious fact that they never deserted each other, but always stood by each other in distress.

Polly could not help being thankful, when he finished his oration by then and there putting his hand in his pocket and taking out some gold, as he sent the hat round for a subscription which he started generously with his own donation. Miss Vere Clavering would no doubt be in need of some of those extra luxuries, which, in their constant knocking about and moving from place to place, had been needed by ladies of deli-

cate constitution. He made a veiled allusion to the draughty lodgings, and unaired beds which had to be encountered in such necessary changes. Everybody put in some coin, and pocket-handkerchiefs were the order of the proceedings.

Then the excitement having quieted down with the retirement of most of the women, the conversation between the men reverted to their favourite topics. And Polly, as she lingered, hoping that Dick would go out, and leave her to get a quiet word with Ben, hated herself for the feeling that her engagement had been always more or less nauseous to her, and that her whole being revolted from the idea of ever being obliged to marry this really kind-hearted man. He was certainly big enough to take care of her, and his protection had been useful not only to her but also to Lea. How was it that the stupidity of his intellect and the vulgarity of his person could be so especially apparent to her, on this very evening, when she ought to have been more than usually grateful to him?

The two men were talking noisily, and the talk, which could scarcely be called a debate—as both were more or less on the same side—was unnecessarily loud. The bass voice became loud and rasping. Ben had pushed his sleeves upwards, half baring his big, sinewy arms with the black hairs on them, as if he were going to strike a blow at the effete European despotisms of which they were so fond of haranguing.

Even to look at Dick was a sort of relief, though his prematurely bald head which, when he did not wear a wig, as he always did on the boards, was a sort of prolongation of his big, hairless forehead, filled her with repulsion. For she was not bound to Dick, and he was at least more intellectual. He made a fool of himself, as they all did at times, but when he was a little drunk Polly declared to herself that the alcohol did not disfigure him so fearfully as it was apt to disfigure Ben, whose big eyes became fishy and his smile oily at once. Still, there was nothing for her but to wait another quarter of an hour in

patience, however little their "chin-music" interested her. By that time they would probably have talked themselves out, and Ben would escort her back to her lodgings.

She would take care that he drank nothing more till they were out in the fresh evening air, and then—once for all—she would break to him that she would have to stay with Lea.

Meanwhile Dick was leaning back with a cigar between his lips. When he removed it a sarcastic smile was curling those thin lips on which the hair was never allowed to grow, for the exigencies of his various "parts."

He spoke as if he were a Revolutionist—a socialist—who would like to be a terrorist, whilst he was forced to be a second-rate actor and a ladies' man.

"You know we are members of the United States, and have a President of the Republic—any man can rise in America," said Ben, with one of his stentorian laughs.

"We were speaking of Europe—of the oppression of the working classes—of the tyrannical capitalist of Ireland already rising—of——"

"Leave Ireland to take care of itself," said Ben, with another laugh.

"You know how I hate politics," interposed the girl, with pouting lips. But Dick, when he was bringing out all his biggest guns after the manner of his "type," did not suffer himself to be interrupted even by a woman.

"Religion," he continued, "is for the Philistines who make bogies for the oppressed people—the rising generation will have nothing with it——"

"You might have spared yourself that hit—I don't think the present company troubles itself much with it," roared Ben, by way of annotation. But the few other men, who were sprawling about in various attitudes comfortable to themselves, stamped and clapped. Dick knew his consummate power over them. When he talked in this excited style he might be nothing

but a fool or an impostor, but he knew how to keep his ascendancy, and how to work on the unpractical and impressionable young fellows around him.

He had now time to turn his attention on the female who had interrupted him.

"If you knew how we had missed you," he simpered, "you, of all people, should be interested in the politics you profess to hate—for it's you women who for centuries have been the most wronged."

He spoke in a squeaky, high-pitched voice, intended to be a musical alto, which he used whenever he wished to make himself agreeable, and his looks were as sentimental as he dared to make them in the presence of Ben.

"To tell you the truth," said the girl, "I didn't half hear what you said. When these sort of fits come on you I never half listen—I was thinking of other things."

Then he entered into a long and eloquent dissertation, "shooting his mouth," as Ben explained, and

getting off his "tough yarns." He told her that she had no capacity for enthusiasm, that women had been ready to die for the sake of emancipation. He inveighed against a state of society in which the strong preyed on the weak, and in which the weak had only the resource of putting out thorns for self-protection. The duty of lying might sometimes be a real duty, a barricade against tyranny—a deceit which was necessary. All actors practised it. Polly listened with an incredulous smile. She did not think it worth while to argue that such departures from truth might defeat their own purposes, or to protest, as the little man brought his ineffectual sledge-hammer down, on the moral rules which, according to him, were made for the benefit of the rich and for the oppression of the innocent. It was like the crowings of a bantam and she waited for them to cease, sitting up in her chair and smiling with a forced appearance of interest.

It was not the first time she had tried to show herself interested in questions which did not in the

least concern her, for she was a true woman, given to individual and not abstract meditations. The attempt was mere politeness, it had never succeeded in deceiving the men; but she wished to keep on good terms with them, and knew that she had startling news to break to her lover when the bantam had done its crowing. Dick turned on her and accused her of being as silent as a fish, and then appealed to his other hearers.

“What is all this talk about law and order but oppression of the people? There is one law for the rich and another for the poor; the time will come when men of property will find they will no longer be able to keep the accumulated gains of a race of robbers.”

Ben nodded, but the girl laughed.

“These are theories in the air; in your case they lead to perfectly safe conclusions. Do you mean to say that in your experience there has ever been a time when you would think yourself justified in laying hands on these—accumulations of robbers?”

He grew angry and evaded the point, for one of the other men joined in the laugh.

"If such an opportunity came to him he would not be faint-hearted," chimed in Ben; "I wish, for instance, we could lay hands on a new lot of wigs, as that last box disappeared in such an unaccountable fashion. *I* might do at a pinch, but Dick would never be able to appear without his wig."

"Women are not generally so downright—to tell you the truth—you were rather hard on him," said Ben, as he looked at Polly tenderly on their way back to her lodgings.

"I don't understand that sort of talk."

"You can understand it perfectly well. You have intellect out of the common; you are quite an extraordinary girl," said Ben, as he tucked her arm affectionately under his. Polly was conscious, as usual, of a revulsion of feeling, but it would not do to quarrel with him. This big Newfoundland dog, who did not think her a fool and had the worshipping look in his

eyes when he called her an "extraordinary girl," had fought many a battle for her to protect her from rudeness or insult. The power of habit was strong, and while his eyes dwelt upon her approvingly she knew that she must hide her impatience and dissatisfaction.

After all, she was carrying out "Little Dick's" theories in acting her part as she generally acted it. For she straightened her brows, and her eyes were clear and firm as before, when she answered,

"It needed no cleverness to find out the weak points in his case. It'll injure your work if you give in to this foolishness."

"It is making no difference to my work."

"I am glad to hear that—you have the public to please; and the hard life you lead would become impossible, if—if you yielded to all these moods."

Polly had not the courage to add there and then, as she had intended, that the "hard life" would not be hers for at least some time to come, and that the impertinence from which he had shielded her—and to which she and Azalea

would otherwise have been subjected, in addition to their other annoyances—need be dreaded by her no longer.

She put off the fatal announcement till the following morning, shrinking from the unusually sentimental look in Ben's eyes—a look which warned her, in some way which she could not define, that he was intending to broach the subject of fixing the day for their marriage.

“Best to let him sleep off the champagne,” thought practical Polly, who had been quite relieved when he had ceased to talk about marriage, being in her secret heart averse to the idea of losing her liberty.

Attractive as she was, she had found it convenient in a company of this sort to be engaged to someone—tall and massive in appearance—who could protect her from the assiduity of others, and the convenience had been still greater when that someone was in no hurry, but could treat her like a comrade. Now, for the first time, it occurred to her, with a suddenness which took away her breath, that it might now be still more convenient to get rid of him altogether.

CHAPTER V.

BEN ASSERTS HIS RIGHTS.

AZALEA was sympathetic as usual. She listened, on the following day, with a look of pity on her face, when Polly told her of her difficulties. But it did not occur to either of the girls that it would be the right thing for Polly openly to break her engagement. The man was coarse and large but he was very good-tempered. There was nothing downright bad about him, and it seemed impossible to both of them to expose themselves to the possibilities of his wrath.

"Being engaged to him was one thing, marrying is another. I never told him that I actually intended to *marry* him," explained Polly, as she settled her

cousin in the old, chintz-covered arm-chair, and prepared to keep the other appointment in which she could no longer delay speaking.

It was an ingenious fib; but, in spite of being irate with Dick, Polly prided herself on her art for making ready excuses.

"Yes, dear, you and I tried to do the best for ourselves, but Ben was invaluable," assented the younger girl, "I don't see how you could have helped it."

"You yourself will be glad to get away from Dick."

A slight flush lit up the pallor of Azalea's face, but she shivered and drew the white knitted "cloud," which Polly's deft fingers had woven for her, more closely round her.

"How much nicer it would be for us both if there were no men!" she said, a little irritably, glancing up into Polly's face. It was a pitiful, appealing glance, as she suddenly corrected herself and added,

"Oh, I needn't be afraid. A person in horrid health is no longer a fascinating object."

"Darling, how dare you talk so!" cried Polly, catching her in her strong arms, and forgetting, in the violence of her embrace, that she was almost squeezing the breath out of her delicate frame.

"Big Ben" was lying negligently on a greasy sofa wrapped in a greasy dressing-gown, when his *fiancée*, (who, in the whole course of her Bohemian life, had never been fettered by the European institution of chaperons) came to visit him by appointment in his sitting-room a few hours afterwards. Japanese devices were embroidered on the dressing-gown, which he had purchased second-hand at one of the stores.

But its splendours were somewhat mitigated by the fact that it was too short for him, whilst his long legs and big, clumsy feet were stretched out beyond the edge of the sofa. There were large holes in the worsted slippers which had been embroidered for him by some former sweetheart, for many women had been sweet upon Ben, but to do him justice he had cared for none of them, till Polly, as he often explained,

"knocked him flat." Roses had been embroidered on the slippers—hideous, English-worsted-work roses—and a butterfly going after the roses, which contrasted somewhat oddly with the Japanese dressing-gown. But butterfly and roses had long ago been submerged in an inky cloud of greasy dirt, from which here and there thin threads of canvas protruded.

The artistic vanity of the man, as well as his entire absence of taste, was demonstrated by the sort of tableau he had prepared for Polly. Other women had told him he was handsome, and his life would have been deprived of one of its principal attractions if he had ceased to believe that he was pleasing in the eyes of the sex.

Yet Polly saw only the defects. He was fat and his coat was threadbare. The complexion which had so often been disfigured by paint, looked spotty and shiny in the morning light.

Still, he had been so kind to her; only the previous evening he had had that gentle thought of making

up a purse, to provide a suffering woman with the luxuries which he could never afford to purchase himself. Was it his fault if he was forced to drink cheap champagne which was more or less poison to him, and to smoke odious weeds, and if—though he was careful never to get drunk—his whole appearance told a story of the combined action of nicotine and alcohol? He did not speak in the nasal tones of some Americans, but when he modulated his voice, as he did when he greeted Polly, that voice was rich and sweet with the intonation which always pleased her, peculiar to the Western man.

“Well, how fares it with the invalid? Is the little sister making progress this morning? It’s a pity one can’t send a hint to that old stager way back in England. If Azalea Deveril ever comes into her fortune there couldn’t be a better time,” he said, as he stretched out his hands in welcome, rising from the sofa and drawing a couple of chairs together.

Polly winced, for he had touched on a subject

which was a sore one to both the girls. The allusion was to an old uncle of Azalea's, whose life had not been exactly a pleasant one; the whole object of which had been to make money. Mr. Deveril was a leather merchant and had lived always in the smell of leather, though he had purchased a little estate in Surrey, which he generally visited on Sundays. Of late years his health had not been good and he was a martyr to insomnia. But when he lay awake at nights his thoughts could not be comfortable ones. He had never cared for books or for natural scenery; neither his library, his pretty house, nor his park-like grounds were of any use to him. He had never married and had never forgiven his only brother for marrying a penniless girl of gentle birth, who had been a governess before her marriage, and who insisted, during her widowhood, on leaving England on account of her delicate health. Roger Deveril had refused to help her, and had announced his intention of leaving his money to distant relations. Mrs. Deveril, if she impressed upon Azalea

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that her uncle was aged and she was the next of kin, had nevertheless insisted that if Roger Deveril cared for anything it could only have been for leather, and that his heart was as leathery as anything else about him. He had made the money, but he could not spend it.

Yet the girls had often chattered about this cynical Uncle Roger who hated his fellow-creatures; had no hobby of any kind, though year after year he piled up his income, and whose money could bring him neither interest nor amusement.

"Lea will *never* come into her fortune," said Polly, with a decided shake of her head. "It will all go to distant relatives—to cousins three times removed, but, of course, it is hard upon her." She had suddenly become reflective, almost oblivious of Ben's existence, as some horrible remarks of Dick's about the disproportion in human lots grated on her memory. Her tone became dreamy—almost far-away—as she said,

"Lea is more precious to me in herself than any of the money, which connection with her could bring

me. We have quite given up thinking any more about the money."

Ben's shrug said, "Azalea is not everything." He had evidently no sympathy to spare for Polly's distressed look, or the little frown which distorted her delicately modelled brow.

"You must recollect," she added, pathetically, "that we have been all in all to each other."

Ben hated this sort of thing.

"You care more for Azalea's little finger, than for the whole of my body," he said, becoming suddenly livid with excitement.

Then he made an effort at self-control and looked at her pleadingly, with the fear of loss in his eyes, as she went on to tell him about the doctor's visit, and how it would kill Azalea to travel, and how the two must be left—for at least a little time—behind. It was his turn to speak. But she listened with signs of impatience difficult to hide, as he told her how hard it would be for him to endure his life during her

absence, and of how mad he thought her to run the risk of throwing up her engagement altogether.

"Higgins'll be glad enough to get it, and possession, as you know, is nine points of the law—there'll be no getting her to budge when once she takes the part. Higgins—for all she dyes her hair—could never look it like *you* at the best of times."

"Let her keep it and welcome—I am sick of the life," said the girl, dragging her hand away from his affectionate grasp.

Ben, in his present mood, was alarming. He was well enough when he took life easily and even comically, as he generally did. To hear him laugh was pleasant enough; his big guffaw being a thing to chase away black melancholy. It was such a hearty laugh, he seemed to laugh with the very innermost part of his being—no one could be deceived about the man's genuine enjoyment of life.

It was pleasant enough, too, to make use of his purse, as Polly had always been accustomed to make

use of it in emergencies. He had to be coaxed into good behaviour like a good-natured Bruin. But, when her lover looked at her as earnestly as he did just at present, it suddenly occurred to Polly that Ben had another side to his character; that he was perhaps more in earnest than Dick would have been about his marriage, and was a man who would fight for his rights, were it even in the wild excitement of a revolution! She remembered now how he was apt to recite his parts with a suicidal energy, and waste his undoubtedly fine voice on the desert air. To play at Socialism with Dick, and to carry on the game of violent attachment for herself, had possibly been the necessary vents for letting off some steam from his overcharged sensibilities.

She began to wish she had not found it necessary to humour Ben by rash promises of marriage, when he put his arm round her waist, and said, reminding her, "You know how we've always counted that if we put our earnings together we should have enough for both."

"Yes, dear," she said, though she flinched. Every moment was of importance to her, and she could not bear to lose the advantage she had gained in dwelling on Azalea's ailments, by letting him guess the blank in her affections, when her conscience told her she ought to be grateful to him. "Yes, dear," she still answered, mechanically, when he went on to explain that, if he spared her for a while to nurse her sick cousin *now*, she must promise in a very short time to join the travelling company at its next destination, when he should claim as his guerdon that the marriage should then and there take place.

"Yes, dear," assented Polly, absently; she would have agreed to anything when she wanted him to make himself useful, by looking out for lodgings for her, and helping her in a great emergency.

She was not accustomed to trouble herself by guessing what was going on in the consciousness of other people, and she only thought it a great nuisance when Ben suddenly seized her hands with the grip

of a drowning man, anxious to save himself from being sucked into the depths, and she—not knowing the great effort which the poor fellow had made to conquer his selfishness—screamed out with the pain, and wrenched her taper fingers suddenly out of his grasp.

“How you hurt me!” she cried, with the *moue* of a humoured child, and then started back at that something in his face which she had never seen in it before.

“You are an iceberg, rather than a woman; you care only for your own sex,” he said, seizing her in spite of herself, and kissing her passionately again and again, while she fought to be free, straining at his arms with energetic hands.

But it was of no use; he was much the stronger of the two. And her struggles availed her nothing as he lifted her from the ground, pressing her close to him. His breath came in short, quick pants and she could hear the beating of his heart. An impulse of self-protection made her twist herself away from him.

"It is brutal—it is not manly—just because you are so big!" she managed to cry out when she could recover her power of speech.

"One would think that I had no rights—that you were not my promised wife," laughed the Goliath, as he stood a few steps off, and made himself merry at her displeasure, "why, Polly, girl, you know it is all right and proper, and no one here to spy on us neither."

The Titan was a good-natured one according to his lights, and it was true that her promise had implied her consent. It was horribly true that he had a right—that she had given him the right with her own free will—and that he had earned it by all he had done for her.

Now was the time to tell him that she did not love him; to beg him to release her from the contract. But she and Azalea were dependent on his bounty, and the thought of Azalea kept her quiet. Though the tears of vexation came into her eyes, she made a desperate effort to command herself.

CHAPTER VI.

PARTING.

“How horrible!” she said to herself a few minutes afterwards, staggering to a seat in the open air, with a burst of angry tears, “I wish he would not—I like him well enough at a distance, but when he insists on things like that, I hate him—oh, I hate him, and I hate myself for being a woman and for ever letting him engage himself to me.”

It began to dawn upon her that it never was likely to be any different, and that the more fuss he made about her the less she was likely to care about him.

“How horrible!” she repeated, wiping her face hard

that she might wipe out the recollection of the kisses. "How horrible that I should have to submit to it! I *must* get away from him at all costs, but I must not tell him what I feel!"

Yet a few hours afterwards she had another revulsion of feeling, when Ben hurried to her with the information that he had been successful in procuring a room for them, in a charming little house at Oaklands—a "tasteful house" so far as Ben's lights went about such matters—belonging to a well-to-do mechanic's wife, who let out one apartment large enough for the two girls.

"Now, I tell you what—you'll starve if you don't take care what you're about—who knows but when we put our horses together again, I may earn enough for the lot of us?" said the man, in his rich accent, as in a burst of generosity he drew out his purse. He explained, with a glowing face, that he had had a stroke of luck, that the manager—possibly alarmed at the defection of others of his *troupe*—had promised to

raise his salary if he would sign an agreement to remain with him for at least a couple of years, and that when Ben signed it there and then, he had given him a cheque for fifteen pounds. The big fellow's eyes glistened as he offered the women a tanner and promised to send more should it be required.

"His bark is worse than his bite," said Azalea, with a faint smile, "I do think, Polly, dear, you might go farther and fare worse."

And Polly, who had succeeded in calming her nervousness and irritability, assented, shamefaced.

Even when Ben, who carried Lea down the stairs, to be ready for the flitting, burst out once more, "Well, I'm blowed if I'll let you go; most men would kick up a devil of a row," Polly told him that she thought it quite natural for him to swear, and she could not help being sorry for him when he put them comfortably into the steam-car, wrapping a greasy railway-rug over their knees, and then ran as far as he could till the car was out of sight.

He could not accompany them to their destination, for he had to perform that night, and on the following day the *troupe*, which was used to hurrying from place to place, set out for Australia. Polly's last recollection of Ben was with the rays of the setting sun shining full on his faithful face, and revealing the fact that big tears were welling up in his eyes, and glittering like dewdrops on the black, stubbly hairs of his cheeks. It did not make him look handsome, for he ran till he grew red and purple in the face, then stopped, puffing and panting, to wipe off tears and perspiration.

The setting sun shone also on hundreds of roofs and chimneys, on the windows of innumerable houses, flashing with brilliant colours, and afterwards on the waters of the bay, which were turning from turquoise to amethyst and onyx in the evening light.

Ben and his devotion were soon forgotten, as both girls cried out with enthusiasm as the train skirted the City front on a road built on piles over the shoals.

Both of them had been so tied by the duties of their profession—the one an invalid and the other condemned to spend much of her time in an unhealthy atmosphere for her cousin's sake—that the view of Oaklands, with the mountains at the back of it, which burst upon them, reflected in the shining water, after the train had skirted the bay for two miles, was entirely new.

They scarcely knew which they admired the most—the city itself, now in the distance, nestling amidst a forest of evergreens, oaks, orchards, parks and vineyards, or the houses of the suburbs, surrounded by this verdure, and charmingly free from the dust, noise and bustle which they had hated. Polly was so delighted that she even forebore to comment severely on Ben's idea of "taste" as she and Azalea took refuge, with a sigh of content, in the little nest which had been selected for them with a careful eye to economy. The sense of rest after turmoil was so grateful to them both that, by mutual consent, they made no remarks about the hideous horse-hair sofa,

the impossible wax flowers, the old felt rugs, the cheap oleographs imported from England, or the ugly china on the mantelpiece.

Azalea's appetite was bad, but Polly prided herself on her housekeeping, setting her wits to work to combine frugality with the purchase of tempting tit-bits.

They laughed like a couple of children together, when Polly spread out all her purchases regularly every day—the dough nuts, oranges and “cookies,” with the “Turkish delight” and candy, the bottle of cheap red wine, and some “Liebig's Extract”—in the exuberant pleasure caused by the outlay of the first of Ben's pieces of gold. The season of grapes, peaches and apricots was not yet, but currants as large as nuts, and cherries inches in circumference could be purchased, with plenty of eggs and milk.

“I should never have had this holiday if it were not for *you*. And yet—I was sick of being a slave and a drudge,” said Polly, drinking the tea, which she had made, in quick gulps, and buttering a portion of

a French roll which she had bought for Lea, saving the crisp crust for the invalid and contentedly munching the spongy, unwholesome centre herself.

She could not as yet get out of the habit of walking about the room, as she ate her impromptu meals in the intervals of conning her parts, rehearsing, or acting; and she was fishing up the eggs from the saucepan, in which they had been boiling, as she looked back with sparkling eyes, and sang one of the little snatches of song which came readily to her lips.

“Toujours gai—Toujours gai!

Then let us chase the clouds away

And follow my example!”

The invalid smiled and tried to take up the refrain.

It was impossible to think of Polly as sallow, or dull-eyed; there was always such a peach-blossom tint on her cheeks, and such an intensity of life about her that it was somehow difficult to associate her with the thought of grief. And yet an acute observer would have seen that her lip quivered as she turned

round again and pretended to busy herself with the fire. For Azalea began to cough directly *she* attempted to sing, and it was an unusual trial for one of Polly's intense disposition to be forced to admit to herself that she did not dare to think about the future.

To live in the world without Azalea, exposed to the persecutions of "Big Ben," seemed to her neither more nor less than an impossibility.

And yet she must laugh; if she did not laugh she would inevitably break down, and to break down would be to hasten any impending catastrophe.

"Little things" are said to please "little minds," and it struck them both as exceedingly amusing that the good woman who let out her lodgings to them, had confused their identity. She invariably addressed Polly as "Miss Deveril," while Azalea had to be content with the more modest name of "Smith."

"Never mind, my dear. She evidently thinks the longest name fits the elder of the two, and you look lots younger than I do," said Polly, patting Lea's

hand in a condescension in which there was more pathos than she cared to show.

For the dowry of suffering had left the younger girl with an appealing, unsophisticated, almost infantine expression.

“ She is half blind, you know. She says we are as like each other as if we were two peas, and that she can’t tell the one from the other. It is a ridiculous idea that we should be as like as Siamese twins, when, as Ben used to say, if I am your double at all I am a transparent double—more like your ghost, I should say, than your double.”

Polly did not laugh. Her sense of humour was not deficient, and she tried to account for her sudden gravity by explaining that she did not like the good soul who let the lodgings, and who had been so careful for their comforts, to be laughed at. What if she were somewhat blind and deaf, and what though the girdle round her waist measured thirty-five inches, she had been motherly and kind, and did not seem at all inclined to be grasping in her charges !

“And so, for the time, we will change places, and leave her, without correcting and worrying her in her mistake. You shall call me Azalea, and I will dub you Polly—whenever she comes in—it will be fun for a change.”

But it did not seem much like fun, for the elder girl's voice trembled, and the younger one did not dare to indulge in hilarity—it brought on the cough. Even the attempt to join in conversation was hindered by tickling in the throat, though Polly bought her toffee and jujubes, which she sucked to stop it.

Day by day the emaciation increased and the effort was greater to creep out into the sunshine, or walk more than a few steps, with that panting breath. And now and then a handkerchief was sent to the wash which Polly, for some mysterious reason, was not allowed to see. She did not guess the worst, though when she gazed at her own rosy face in the cheap mirror, which puffed out her cheeks and made her eyes look askance, she could not help being struck

by the fact that the likeness was growing less and less between herself and her cousin. Her own bright, though shaded hair, reddish, with dashes of auburn verging into brown, was now considerably darker than Azalea's which seemed to have faded from lack of nourishment. Her eyes, which seemed to drink in light from the beauty around her, were clearer and deeper in colour, her step buoyant and her form full of plastic grace.

There were intervals in the days in which she could spare time from nursing Lea, when she spent hours in the open air, and when vague shadowy thoughts stirred her imagination in a way she could not understand, piercing like rays of sunshine through her other more dolorous forebodings. For she was so young, and her splendid physical health insisted on asserting itself.

No melancholy could deprive her of the sense of freedom with which she climbed a little ascent on the mountain side, and imbibed fresh scents of the salt sea air. Far away she could see the waves rolling on the

shore, fringed by a lace-work of foam, and only when she ran down again to be in time to minister to Lea, there would be once more the dismal feeling that that hill behind the city was barring her in.

Hope seemed to be in some unknown region where prison bars would not hem her in, and to be wafted to her with its fair promises—beckoning her to come away. She could not get rid of the thought which seemed to her cruel, even when she looked at the horizon from which the ships came sailing. The mysterious Unknown, which seemed to tempt her, was far beyond that quivering line of blue. It was hard and unnatural to be condemned always to sordidness and want, always to pass her life in a monotonous insipid state, or in drudgery and toil, and never to be able to say, “I have had my day; I have lived my life.”

Polly never divulged these thoughts. They only came to her at intervals, and then she lapsed again into her anxious, excited state, ashamed of herself, when her darling was suffering, to be so conscious, even for a

moment, of this wild craving for freedom, this delicious and intoxicating idea that escape might still be possible from the man she did not love, and all the petty and disagreeable details of her everyday, bread-getting existence.

The recollection of Ben was like a nightmare to her. It haunted her in her sleep, and she began to dread the rap of the postman—lest it should bring her another of his letters. Her conscience reproached her with not writing more to him herself, and once, when she was out walking, she thought she caught a glimpse of a figure like his. It must have been her mistake, for Ben was far away, and he had signed an engagement with the manager never to desert his post. Yet she crouched behind a hedge, and afterwards, with fluttering breath, took refuge in flight.

CHAPTER VII.

AZALEA'S FORTUNE COMES TOO LATE.

So the weeks passed by till the money which Ben had given them and the little hoard saved by Polly for emergencies were oozing, and the girls scarcely dared to question the future, or think of what they should do when the money was all spent. After the buffeting and hardships of theatrical life, it had done them both so much good to play at independence, that there were days when Polly flattered herself that Azalea even looked a trifle better, taking the brightness in her eyes and the increased cheerfulness of her manner as a joyful confirmation of the improvement in her condition. The soft breeze which blew in

through the open window failed, indeed, to bring a touch of health to the thin, wan cheeks, on which the hectic spots still glowed so brilliantly, but her spirits were improved and she certainly coughed less.

How would it be when the fund was all expended, and when Ben's patience might be expended with it? It was a subject on which Polly scarcely dared to linger, for there were signs of impatience already in Ben's letters. Already he had begun to urge that he thought he had done his duty, and that his life and Polly's should not be sacrificed to Azalea's ill health. And Polly did not like to admit to herself that there was truth in what he said. Click, click, went her needle—for she had begun to take in needlework—having vague hopes that she might prevent her cruse of oil from diminishing. But the needlework was so queerly done, with gaping stitches and knotted thread, that folks refused to give her more. Yet Polly was still persuaded that the great secret was to employ herself, to wander in the open air, or occupy herself

with helping the landlady to prepare delicacies for Lea—anything rather than to allow herself time to think.

The necessity for strict economies jarred as usual with the taste for everything neat and pretty—a taste which probably came down to her from some of her English ancestors. When Azalea breakfasted in bed Polly would fidget about the room, never satisfied with the effect which her utmost efforts could produce.

The shabby sheet would be shaken out and a twitch given to it, but no amount of fingering could make the folds hang properly or efface the ugly stains caused by Azalea's medicine, which had been dropped upon it. And when the time came for the sick girl to get up for breakfast—the two deluding themselves, as was their fashion, with all sorts of fairy schemes never to be carried out, such as, "When you get a little better, dear, we'll go boating or picnicking,"—Ben's railway wrap, which had once been a sort of Persian blanket, was spread on the horse-hair sofa

to make it as comfortable as possible. Polly had dreamed, when she was rich enough, of manufacturing a chintz cover for it; but that day seemed farther off than ever, seeing that there was not even a margin to pay for the wear and tear of clothes. Yet when the summer flowers were all in their glory, and the trees in their best superabundance of foliage, Polly, as she gave a glance at herself in the glass, could not help wishing that she had something a little prettier to wear. It had not much to do with vanity—it was rather a sense of the fitness of things; for Polly, who never sighed for her past theatrical tawdriness, felt as if her threadbare garment was a jarring note in that beautiful Nature, where the flowers were clothed in red velvet, blue satin, or cloth of gold, and where the birds were in rich plumage and the beetles like jewels.

Would she not have been happier without the sensitiveness which made her so painfully aware of the coarsenesses, incongruities, and the deprivations of

her life? She knew that she and Azalea had no right to those finer feelings which had made the atmosphere around them and their whole experience as actresses, in some indefinable way, impure. That rude experience had at times been a sort of purgatory to them, and yet neither would complain to the other of what she had secretly to endure.

They hated it; the transitory escape from it had not served to make the outlook any better.

"A little while and we must go back; I alone, or both together—he won't have patience much longer," thought Polly to herself, as her needle clicked. In vain she tried to rally herself to look at life only on the practical side; the domination of certain tastes and modes of thought was too powerful to be shaken off, and that new sort of perception which had been cultivated in her since her rambles in field and forest, too acute to be got rid of.

"A little while and the last dollars will be spent—I shall never be able to dance again, and I shall only

be a miserable drag upon Polly," thought Azalea, as she lay on the sofa and insisted on pricking her tender fingers with the needle, difficult to handle in her state of weakness, but having to be pacified with the pretence of doing something to help Polly; the pain in her lung, which had been scared away for a time by the excitement of her new life, coming back in its intensity.

Polly tried to blind herself to the fact that her darling was no better. But one morning when she had been out early on some shopping expedition, she returned to find Lea lying apparently speechless on her bed, to which she had crawled from the sofa. The eyes were more widely opened than usual, and seemed to have deepened in tint to a more intense china-blue, and the thin, transparent hand, on which the violet veins were beginning to show painfully, was pressed on the heaving bosom, from which the breath came in hurried pants. The face was pale but transformed; a triumphant gladness was shining in it, but

the feet were cold, and she was shivering as if she would never be warm again, though, as Polly often reminded her, they were living in a climate which never varied from winter to summer more than ten degrees, and nobody had any right to be cold.

Polly's first thought was that a pot of strongly-scented Gloire de Dijon roses, which she had bought with her earnings for her darling, to remind her of England, might have overpowered her by their perfume, and she reached forward for the pot to put it out of the room. Then she saw that Azalea was hugging a letter—a letter of huge proportions, fastened with big seals.

"He is gone. My rich uncle is dead—he thought of me at the last—his only brother's one child—and—I wonder the lawyers found me out. He has left me all his money, and his place in Surrey," gasped the sick girl, bringing out the words in quick gasps, and in a sort of whisper. Then she began to laugh hysterically, laughter followed by tears—and next the

cough came on in paroxysms, and Polly's efforts were in vain to soothe it.

The elder girl had to put a violent effort upon herself to keep from crying as well, for "the pity of it" coming just now—the letter being delivered in her absence, so that she could not have asked Azalea to let her open it, or break its exciting contents to her by degrees. Her pity overpowered her even more than the pleasure. It needed no physician to tell her how the joy was too great for Azalea to be able to bear it, and that the shock of it in her present condition would be almost as prostrating as a sudden shock of grief.

"Don't talk of it just this minute," she said, pushing the paper away from the eager grasp of the trembling fingers, which twitched convulsively as they tried to hold it. "You are trembling, and your teeth are chattering."

She held her closely to herself, and began to chafe the twitching hands, wishing that the great eyes were

not so unnaturally luminous from the effect of that strong emotion. "You must make haste and get well; there will be more reason now," she said, attempting to speak considerately, and to calm her own voice, almost wishing that she could get away from the gaze of those wide-open, glittering eyes.

Azalea looked at her with that peculiar smile which appeared to transfigure her face, as if some mysterious light were shining behind it, and seeming to illuminate it. She made an effort to speak and then turned away her face, as if she had changed her mind, and would keep her thoughts to herself. Why should she tell Polly that she knew she would never get well, and so spoil the pleasure of the few days which they had left to spend together? Why even confide to her that she must make haste to do what had to be done, if she would benefit anyone with this money?

"I shall have to write—and to prove my identity," she gasped again, in broken speech, carrying her handkerchief to her mouth, holding it under the pillow,

and then bringing it out again and holding it to her lips, as Polly said triumphantly, "There will be no doubt about the identity; 'Big Ben,' and the manager, and everyone knows."

There was more uncertainty in voice than words, for the idea of a will, when they knew nothing about law, appalled them both. There was something disconcerting in the elder girl's look as she took up the papers and handled them gingerly, seeing possible vistas of lawyers' contracts, and contingencies which might be more or less difficult to meet.

Azalea understood. "There is nothing of that sort," she explained, with panting breath. "It is all perfectly straightforward. There are no first cousins, even—and no relations—just some of a very distant sort. He left it to me—after all—because there was no one else—of—of any consequence, and if—I should be worse—there is nothing—to hinder me—in making my will—and leaving the whole—of it—to whom—I choose. Of course, I shall make you my heir."

Polly smoothed her pillow, not liking the flushed cheeks which told of the galloping pulse. It was a good thing, as she said to herself, that there was not a plethora of relations, and she was ashamed of herself for her own selfish thoughts, which were already flying like birds over the ocean to the England which it was possible Azalea might never reach. "I will go with you," she said, almost in a whisper, "but we must make quite sure that there will be no lawsuit—no one to dispute it—you are not strong enough for worry."

"Yes—you must go with me—things will be different now. He will spare you—for at least—a little longer," panted the sick girl, looking at her with the yearning look which seemed to tell her cousin in that moment of intense feeling how she had never thoroughly liked her being mixed up with a man like Ben, and how she knew that that engagement had been entered into, partly for her sake. "Who knows—if you have patience—but things will come right

—for you—as well as for me? I always blamed my uncle—but he was generous—at the last.”

She was sitting up in her bed, and asking for paper and ink. “I must write at once. It does not do to—put things off.” Was it because the veil of flesh had grown so thin that that dignity had come into her bearing, that pathos into her voice?

Usually it was Polly who took the lead, but the relationship between them seemed to be suddenly altered. Azalea was even speaking in a stronger voice, as she stretched out her hands for the pen, “It will be a mere nothing to write and prove the identity; though that is proved already, by the letter which has come to me, and followed us from Melbourne into this country,” she said, in tones which surprised Polly, they were so much clearer than usual. Then suddenly she added, “It is getting dark,” though the day was a magnificent one, and the sun was streaming through the window. “Draw up the blind a little higher.”

Her cousin turned round to see if it were possible to draw it higher, and then what happened exactly she could never afterwards tell; how it was that Azalea gave a little cry—less like a cry than a sound in the throat—and that when she hastened to help her she saw that she had fallen forward on the bed, with her eyes turned upwards, and that she did not know her.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRIED BEYOND HER STRENGTH.

EVERYTHING that happened afterwards remained more or less like a dream to Polly—the violent ringing of the bell, which she must have rung like an automaton, the coming of the landlady, the useless remedies of smelling salts, eau de Cologne, and vinegar, the sending for the doctor, who had no consolation, no hope to give her, the useless self-reproach when she kept on repeating to herself, “If I had not gone out so early, that I might have been at home, and have broken the news to her by degrees! Or if this news had only come before—or not come at all—when its coming could only kill her!”

It was cruel, it made her rave again against fate. The doctor had told her to be brave, but she could not be brave—all her energy seemed to be exhausted. She remained stupefied, tearless, gazing at the dead body a few hours afterwards, when other women had dressed it for the burial, which must come so soon, in a "lot" in a strange country, which she had scarcely money enough to pay for, and which seemed to her much more dismal than an English churchyard.

All that remained of Azalea had been covered with white flowers, and it lay smiling like a bride. A clergyman would read the service over it, but Polly wondered for the first time if she had neglected her duty in not sending for some of the people who called themselves Christians, while Azalea was yet alive. Her fear that they would be "psalm-singing hypocrites," as "Little Dick" had always given her to understand, or that even a parson would be "right down upon her," had, perhaps, kept her from giving

Azalea another sort of chance—she could scarcely define what. Had she been a Buddhist or a Mohammedan she would have had a more definite idea about this chance! For it seemed to her as if a blind Fate ruled the universe,—a Fate which had deprived her of the only being she loved, just at the very moment when happiness had been in store for her.

So the hours passed till the sun had set, but she—caring nothing for what others thought—had forbidden them to draw down the blinds in the room. More than once the old landlady stole in to ask if she would take anything to break her fast, or drink a cup of tea to refresh herself, and then had crept out again, alarmed. For Polly had not only refused the inevitable panacea of tea, but had answered her with a shake of her head, or a hopeless movement of her hand, staring right out in front of her. It was as if she saw nothing but that silent figure on the bed, and kept repeating “She is *dead!*” so as to force herself to face the horror of the reality.

Azalea was dead! She would never walk, never laugh, never dance again, never smile at her except with that stereotyped smile which was enigmatical and terrible, with the consciousness of having solved the riddle "of this painful earth," and of being unable to communicate it to her. Polly began to be alarmed, as the shadows grew deeper, by the solemn majesty of this smiling corpse, with its wax-like hands crossed on its breast, and to ask herself if this could in reality be all that remained of Lea, the little girl who had played with her, who had looked up to her, and come to her as a refuge from all her troubles, and—with that tendency of the human mind to look back upon the past as more blessed than the present—she recalled her ways, and her sympathizing kisses, telling herself that life would be unendurable without her. "We were all in all to each other. She stood to me in the place of father, mother, sister, and—lover," she thought, unconsciously paraphrasing the words of Andromache in the wildness of her grief. And then

suddenly she recollected "Big Ben." And her heart smote her with despair as she realized that now—when her last penny would be spent on the necessary burial of the dead—she should have to send to her future husband for more money—for at least so much as would enable her to join him in Australia.

And then there was her promise. That feeling, as if cold drops of water were falling one by one, with a torturing sensation, down her back, and which she had had ever since the doctor had told her that Azalea had not fainted this time, but would never wake again, came upon her unendurably at the remembrance of her promise. She had always chafed against the bond which united her to Ben, though it had seemed best to submit to it, for more than one reason. Yet she knew that it was hard upon Ben that a girl as young as she was should have the power to lead him captive at her will, and that he should be able to make no resistance; and she could imagine how maddened the big, tender-hearted, but passionate fellow would be at

the mere idea that his future wife should attempt to escape from him.

“He is not a man to be trifled with; he would kill you if you trifled with him,” one of the other actresses had hinted, when she tried to warn Polly. And Polly fully believed it. He was vulgar, but he was strong, and his strength of character pleased her better than his vulgarity. “You will write,” he had said at their last meeting, “write as much and as often as you can.” She knew how ungrateful she had been in writing seldom and little, though she had seemed to assent, partly because she did not wish to make their parting more painful, and partly from not wishing to triumph in her power of making him happy or wretched. He had tried to keep up her remembrance for him by sending her not only long letters, but big valentines, with staring paper and flowers, and lines from Lalla Rookh, to which he had added some of his own in manuscript, in which “dear” and “clear,” “sweet” and “heat,” were intended to delight her with a sense of his poetical power.

The two girls had laughed together at Ben's verses, and Azalea—who had to check her merriment because it brought on the cough—had added, "He might at least have waited till Valentine's day!" But to look at her as she lay there in the majesty of her transformation, it did not seem possible that ever in her life those white lips could have laughed. And yet the remembrance of how Azalea had sometimes joked at Ben and his rough ways, came back to Polly with an odd sensation of the ludicrous at this terrible moment, and then she rose and paced the room, flinging out her arms like a swimmer combating for life itself in deep water.

"If Lea could only have lived, I would not have minded so much. I could, perhaps, have told him the truth, and we two, when we once had money, could have escaped together to England in peace. He would have found some other woman to care about him, and we girls would have sufficed for the happiness of each other. How deliciously happy we should have

been, and in what a paradise we should have lived. The mere sense of freedom would have been paradise for *us!*"

And then, dreams of what might have been floated again before her eyes. How often had she exercised this faculty, which had come to her from childhood, telling herself to keep still and concentrate her mind on some mental vision which she could be successful in creating for herself! She had been the central figure of these visions, and had seen herself on various occasions triumphant and fêted, with all the pleasures and glories of the world around her.

For Azalea's sake she had controlled these fancies, and had never allowed them to take possession of her lately; but now that Lea was dead, it seemed more wretched than ever to give herself up to the wearing toil of a hard-working life, as the wife of a third-rate actor whom she had never loved. It was only the fact that she was penniless, that she must starve or go back to Ben, which could enable her to face the

prospect. She felt as if death itself would be in some way preferable to the life she had before her, and yet she was young and healthy, and the instinct of life was strong in her. Then a sudden thought struck her. It seemed to come from without—an awful suggestion, penetrating like a ray of light into things which before had been dark—an exciting idea which dazzled her eyes, dancing before them like a jewel, till she was unable to put it on one side.

It came, as it were, and took possession of her, dominating her with a power which she was unable to resist. Something which she had never known before seemed to throb in her veins—a species of intoxication—a ferment of rebellion. Fate had dashed the cup of freedom from her just as she was about to put it to her lips, but though she was only a weak woman it occurred to her now that it might be possible for her to foil fate.

Not only possible but easy. The landlady, the only person who had taken any interest in the two girls,

had confused their identities and knew her by the name of Azalea Deveril, and had insisted on calling the dead cousin by the name of Polly Smith. They had humoured her in the idea, treating the matter as a good joke, and had not taken the trouble to contradict her. The arrangements for the funeral were to be made on the following morning, but meanwhile good blundering Mrs. Sedley had certainly given the wrong name, not only to the doctor but to the undertaker. It was Mary Smith whom she had reported to be dead; the certificate of death would be made out in that name. There was nobody in " 'Frisco " to contradict the idea; nobody likely to trouble about the identity of two unknown damsels, who had been living in retirement ever since the other actors had set out for Australia, who were supposed to have departed with their company, and who had never acted under their own names.

Azalea had not lived to will the property to her cousin as she intended, but there could be no doubt

about her intentions. And as to her proposed letter to the lawyer, she had been so little of a scribe that nobody was likely to be acquainted with her handwriting. It would be as easy as possible for Polly to communicate with the lawyer under the name of Azalea Deveril, and to personate her character. Should inquiries be made, the likeness between them had been so remarkable that she would only have to dye her hair a few shades lighter, and to whiten her cheeks to assume the personality of Azalea. And as for Ben, he would hear that Polly died suddenly, and that Azalea had gone back to England, her uncle having left her his property, and he would be so overcome by grief as not to trouble about Lea. Ben and Dick would be far away; she would never be likely to meet them, or any of the people who had acted with her. And once released from her present circumstances, she would live in a retired fashion, so as never to have to fear the slightest danger from any such expert observers.

It was dark by this time, but she lit the candles, and taking up with shaking fingers the letter from the lawyer, which had been forgotten in her burst of grief, she sat down and tried to read it. But she could not concentrate her attention. Once more she was taking a flight into the tawdry halls of fancy. She was young and had known deprivation, and even semi-starvation, in her life. Why should she not know the joys as well as the sufferings of existence; the pleasures, subtle and sweet, which money could buy for her; the delights of luxury and the joys of independence? The world seemed to beckon to her. Why should she not go to England—that England where she was born—and live like other refined gentlewomen? It was not as if she asked for much. A vulgar glorification of riches and splendour, with the thought of men and women lifted like the gods of Epicurus above the troubles of life, came natural to one who had known the meaner worries and pinpricks of life. Had it been

only the thought that ill-cooked, untempting meals should be things of the past, and that rags of underclothing, requiring constant darnings, could be replaced by lace-trimmed linen—*that* in itself would have had power to tempt her.

But it was the idea that she could flee from a life which might in other ways become hideous and loathsome, that she could make for herself fresh surroundings, fresh friends, and new associations, and that she should not be forced to marry, but could leave Polly Smith with all her difficulties and entanglements behind her, which came to her like an arrow, piercing its way to her secret heart. "Azalea, oh my darling—you of all others would understand, if you knew about it," she cried, sinking on her knees by the bedside, and kissing the motionless folds of the shroud. "It is what you would have wished, I shall only do what you would have done."

And the serene majesty on the marble brow of the dead girl did not seem to rebuke her, but smiled

on her as before, with the same enigmatical smile. The smile did not frighten Polly; neither was she scared by subtle distinctions between right and wrong, such as might have troubled a well-brought-up girl.

According to the doctrines which Ben and Dick had preached to her, there was no such thing as temptation; human beings were like brutes, driven by their instincts. Even these instincts were inherited, and a man might be at one time of his life the inheritor of some dark deed, committed by some remote ancestor, however much a sense of duty, transmitted by a conscientious parent, may have restrained him within narrow limits, for the greater part of his humdrum existence. And what was conscience but an inherited faculty—a mere habit, preaching penitence? And what was the abundance of the rich, but property stolen from the poor?

The distinctive effects of this materialistic philosophy upon all that in her childhood she had held most sacred had been limitless, though she did not know

it. What was life, but a narrow plank between two extremes of annihilation? From nothing again to nothing? How could anyone be blamed for extracting the greatest amount of pleasure in the short space given to each human being for enjoyment? Fear of God—had they not told her that God was not real?

“Thank Heaven,” Ben had said to her, “you never went in for any sort of religious humbug.”

There had been a greater craving after “religious humbug” than he ever could guess. But neither of the two girls had any fixed belief of their own, to serve as a check to the precipitancy of such opinions on the part of the men. Perhaps Azalea knew *now*, but she did not answer. When Polly questioned her she seemed all attention, but the smiling lips were closely compressed and never stirred.

The time was going on. It had always been going on. She remembered how her mother, when she lectured her in her childhood, used to tell her that lost time would always confront her; that was one of the

old-fashioned ways of talking. Was it possible there could be such a thing as lost time? She rose and inspected the little timepiece on the mantelpiece. Its hands pointed to two o'clock. The other people in the house had long ago gone to bed—she had told them not to sit up, for that night she would watch alone by the dead; and she remembered that by the morning it would be necessary for her to decide. Two o'clock! Five minutes past! The pulsation sickened her, she got up again and stopped the clock by shaking it.

Then she must have dozed, worn out by fatigue, for once more she seemed to hear the squeaky voice of "Little Dick" haranguing the other actors, and telling them that the duty of lying might sometimes be a real duty, a necessary protection in a state of society in which the strong played on the weak. Once more she seemed to hear him crowing like a bantam. "What is all this talk about law and order but oppression of the people? There is one law for the rich

and another for the poor; the time will come when men of property will no longer be able to keep the accumulated gains of a race of robbers."

She woke with a start to the recollection of her grief. The room was no longer dark, and there was an opal light in the sky, deepening into rose colour near the horizon. It seemed unnatural that the sun should be rising as brightly on a morning when she could no longer share her sense of rapture in its beauty with Lea. She hated the idea of the day, which would have to be passed without her cousin, and of the other days which must follow—unless there was a change in her life. And once more the temptation assailed her, which might not have been so vivid if her nerves had not been strained to the uttermost; if the wild impulse after freedom, which had tormented her all her life, had not been triumphing over a nature weakened by the agony of parting from the being she had loved best in all the world.

In the morning light it seemed to her that there

was something disapproving in Lea's smile. Yet how could that be? There were but two theories about the dead. Either, as Ben and Dick thought, they ceased to exist, or if they loved us they could not grudge us a little pleasure in this life. "How could the angels be angels, and grudge a little happiness to a poor mortal like me?" asked Polly, dismissing the thought as unworthy of her credence. The logic ought to have been undeniable, and yet she was illogical. For drops of perspiration stood on her brow, as she made more than one effort to free herself from the weird inspiration. Struggling seemed to be of no use, for it returned again and again, taking its seat beside her, and whispering black thoughts, like a fiend, into her ears. The thoughts seemed to her to be white ones, but the struggle might still have continued had not Mrs. Sedley's quavering voice been heard at the door.

"I've brought ye a cup o' tea, Miss Deveril, dearie."

"She calls me *Miss Deveril*," whispered Polly to

herself. "Fool that I should be not to avail myself of the opportunity!"

And there and then she asked if Mrs. Sedley's husband would kindly write a letter for her—a letter which she felt too weary and miserable to write at once herself—to the poor actor to whom Mary Smith had been engaged to be married, to tell him of the sudden death which had taken them all by surprise.

Polly laid stress on the word "sudden" when she dictated the letter—in which she added that in consequence of her uncle's death Miss Deveril had been summoned to proceed immediately to England, being in too weak a state of health and too much crushed by her sorrow to do more just at present than to send condoling messages. Everything after that seemed to be made easy to her, for, on preparing to answer the lawyer's letter, she found that a cheque had been enclosed to Azalea filled up with a sum sufficient to meet the necessary expenses for her mourning and for her immediate return.

The funeral was less trying than she had expected. There was but one mourner, and if that mourner managed to veil her face and hair, and even to drape her figure by deeper crape than was necessary, no one interfered. It was only when the coffin was lowered into the grave with the name "Mary Smith" engraved on it, that the new Lea found it difficult to be firm and resist the shuddering fit which shook her in all her members, as the earth was sprinkled over the lid.

But, after all, she was young, and the prospect of novelty and adventure is always pleasant to the young.

The future seemed to present no insurmountable difficulty, and she was so thankful to escape from the life which she had dreaded, that she heaved a deep sigh of relief when the little snorting and panting engine, which was to drag the train to the wharf, set off through the suburbs of Oaklands, taking her far away from her mean and humiliating surroundings.

Part II.

CHAPTER I.

IN HIDING.

It was a bright morning early in October, about a year and a half afterwards. Rain had fallen during the night at Forest Hill, and the wet leaves were shining with a vivid light, rendered brilliant and almost unnatural by the yellow tints of the beech, the red of the ash, and the russet of the oak.

Shafts from the autumnal sun penetrated through the branches of the trees, glittering on the moss-stained boles of the beeches, and the grey trunks of the old oak-trees, which looked, where the shade was deepest, as if they were black as well as gnarled with age. The sun-shafts also smote on the tangled

underwood, with its dank clusters of red briony and lingering purple blackberry; they lighted up the puddles on the road, humouring the vanity of miniature pools that mimicked the glories of the sky.

Here and there, on the side of the road, the fences had been broken down, revealing glimpses of the wood, where a few blossoms of golden-rod still lingered. A gate which led into the grounds of a house called Woodlands had a sign-board labelled "Private," and on it "Trespassers will be prosecuted," but the sportsman smiled to himself as he read the aggressive interdict. "Seems as if she likes to be queen of all she surveys," he said to himself, "and yet cannot afford to have her fences mended!"

His smile was benevolent, if not a little patronizing, for he had long passed the rawness of youth and, though his eye was keen and his hand steady, it was not his habit to hurry himself in his movements. He had fallen behind the shooting-party, which was a little ahead, partly because the road was un-

usually muddy and he had an objection to being unnecessarily spattered with dirt from head to foot, and partly because he was as fond of meditation as old Izaak Walton, and liked to infuse a little of it into all forms of sport. But as he stopped somewhat leisurely to survey the prospect, the spell of silence was broken by a faint stir. He listened, "cocking his ears," as his sister called it, as he had "cocked" them from boyhood, to listen to the sounds which stirred his pulses and put him on the alert, with that inherited propensity for sport which comes to most Englishmen as a natural endowment. .

What was it? The whirr of a covey of pheasants, or the sound of rabbits, scudding away to their burrows among the roots of the tall fir-trees, in the wilderness labelled "Private"? Whatever it was, his dogs suddenly became excited, and one of them in its eagerness had already leapt through the broken fence. He called to it, but it was too late—it did not obey his call; and in another moment he, too, had cleared the broken hedge,

and bent his steps for a well-known short cut which would enable him to rejoin his friends, and which he had long been accustomed to take through the little wood.

"A woman has no right to make a private snuggerly of it—the wood has been public from time immemorial," he said to himself, as he deliberately followed his dogs.

He did not know whether to be vexed or pleased at the fact that the dogs had taken the initiative, since he had more than once threatened—half in earnest and half in fun—to break through the enchanted solitude of the maiden, who was vaguely rumoured to have come over from the wilds of Australia, and who insisted on hiding herself from the eyes of men. But before he had time to make up his mind, the Fates willed it that the maid herself, who was that morning standing amongst her gardeners, consulting with them, suddenly confronted him with flashing eyes.

She resented the intrusion of the dogs, but more

than all she resented the appearance of a man with a gun. * If he was after the pheasants, she was determined to protect the pheasants. She was ready with a storm of denunciation against the Englishman's instinct for killing, and all such slaying of dumb creatures. But speech did not seem to be necessary. The eloquence of her stately attitude, her outspread arm, and her gesture of authority as she stood amongst her people, consulting with them over some improvements which she contemplated in thinning the trees, was sufficient to make him feel like an idiot.

"You are under some mistake, sir. There is no thoroughfare through these grounds," she said, with the air of a queen, speaking in a rich, full voice, in which it would have been difficult to detect the American accent.

"Oh-h!" he replied, and she felt herself getting hot, for his tone was a trifle ironical, and it was unreasonable to be angry with him for his incredulous "Oh!" "Oh, do you really find it necessary to be so particular in the shooting season?" He spoke loudly,

and was evidently not in the least ashamed of himself. Indeed, it rather seemed to her that the irony increased, as he added, gallantly, "All such rules, madam, are apt to be less strictly observed at this season of the year;" and he laughed back at her, lifting his hat.

He had often threatened to have a good look at her, and he was making the fullest use of his time. He could not compare her to a young Diana. She hated the hunt, and thought that to inflict suffering on the meanest thing that breathed was tantamount to crime in a man, and yet she walked and stood with the ease and grace of a Diana. She was sunburnt, and the rich brown of her cheek was like the hue of a mellow peach when the colour glows on it. Her hair was of the tint of the russet leaves, her throat well set on her shoulders, and her eyes lustrous. He took in all these points in a second, as well as the humorous fact that two lads and one man seemed to form a sort of bodyguard about her,

and that there was something almost reverential in the way in which they watched their young mistress's eye. Evidently they were entirely under her influence, so much so that if she were to command them, by one of her imperative gestures, it was even possible they might try to oust the intruder.

"Excuse me; I am a stranger here, and you cannot expect me to be acquainted with the etiquette which dictates the relaxation of your rules," she answered, in the same queenly manner.

And now it was his turn to flush angrily. For Ralph Carlyon was the son of one of the oldest landowners in Surrey, whereas her uncle had been only a *parvenu*. "It is no fault of mine," he said, "if our grounds are near each other, and I refer to the unwritten etiquette which has always, for generations past, existed between neighbours."

He waited a moment, fumbling for his card, and shifting his breech-loader to his left arm. The precaution was needless, for ~~any~~ person being familiar, the

man mumbled his name. Yet to his surprise the name seemed to have no effect upon her; it might have been the first time she heard it, for all the impression it made.

“Whether your estate be a neighbouring one or not,” she continued, in the same chilling tone, “the grounds on which you are trespassing do not belong to you. And our opinions differ about the pheasants. We have no preserves here, but if any of the poor birds whom you are pursuing have taken refuge with me, there is no international law which compels me to give them up for slaughter. I am new to your English customs, but I have heard that pheasants do occasionally wander. So much the better for them if they seek shelter with me.”

She spoke a little slowly and pronounced her consonants carefully, leaving the vowels to take care of themselves. But the vowels were full and clear, and there was music in the voice. Even her hands were flowerlike, and she used them to emphasize her conversation in a way which had a curious charm. Would

he have liked it as well had he known that all this was the survival of a theatrical education? And then when she seemed to glide rather than walk as she came a little nearer to him, *that*, too, was a relic of a former state of existence, as well as the intonations of her musical voice.

There was a queer, contagious charm about her, different to that exercised by the common run of women, and he found himself succumbing to the fascination evidently exercised over her *employés*. It had the effect of making him curiously unwilling to comply with her wishes; for he was a man of strong will, whose mind, if it did not move rapidly, moved conclusively. Seeing her once, meant seeing her again. Having found his opportunity, he was determined to pursue his advantage. "If I turn back, fair lady, in obedience to your behest, I cannot do so without asking why you should hide yourself when we have all been so anxious to make your acquaintance, or without thanking the kindly chance which has led to our first meeting."

Just at that moment the sound of other footsteps, and the barking of other dogs, following possibly in the trail of the war-path, apparently angered and excited her, for a tinge of deeper crimson was dyeing her cheeks. There was banter in his tone, and she was in no humour for banter. "You mock me," she said, angrily. "Spare me your mockery, and keep back your associates, if they, too, intend to intrude on a woman who chooses to hide herself."

One of the lads stepped impulsively forward. It seemed an impossibility that even these untutored hinds should attempt to hasten his exit by force. The foolish boy had forgotten the breech-loader, and in Carlyon's smiling attempt to avert a possible catastrophe, he changed his position hurriedly, and struck his hand with some force against the trunk of a tree.

It did not escape her notice that the hand was badly hurt, and in an instant there was a singular revulsion of feeling.

CHAPTER II.

HER FIRST HOSPITALITY.

SHE had recovered from her sudden fright as the sound of the barking died away, and it became evident that no one else was likely to intrude on their privacy. But that was not all. The sight of the few drops of blood trickling on Carlyon's sleeve had a curious effect upon her.

"You have hurt yourself," she said, and the sound of her voice had suddenly become dulcet, pitying and womanly. Her face was sympathetic, and a corresponding change appeared on the faces of the lads, one of whom had narrowly escaped being felled to the ground but a moment or two before.

In vain did Ralph Carlyon assure her that the skin was only grazed, and the bruise not worth mentioning. He spoke somewhat brusquely, not having yet recovered from the insult, which might have driven him to assert himself in some unpleasant fashion, had he not controlled himself with his sense of the politeness due to a woman. But when she came nearer to him, insisting on inspecting the wound, declaring that it was much more serious than he allowed it to be, that the wrist was beginning to swell, and that she was really not sure it might not be dislocated, he ceased to be annoyed at the *contretemps*, and began to be rather pleased than otherwise at the turn which affairs had taken. Women's nerves were, after all, but poor affairs, when they allowed themselves to be so easily affected by a drop or two of blood. There seemed to be nothing for him but to submit when she sent her servants into the house with messages about lint, bandages, and brandy.

It was useless to hint that nothing had happened

of sufficient importance to prevent him from accompanying the party which was on in front, or regaining the stragglers who were behind. "Let the birds have a rest, you will shoot nothing to-day!" she said, with a return of the imperative manner. And he ended in weak submissiveness, whistling to his dogs, one of whom did not return, whilst the other came back leaden-footed and disconsolate, following the melancholy procession into the house.

For to the house they positively went, Carlyon laughing wickedly in his sleeve at the recollection that no profane masculine hoof had ever before invaded her castle. He was put on a sofa in the dining-room, his hand and wrist being bandaged by delicate fingers. And if he felt it a little hard on him to be compelled to stay behind in this silly fashion, and knew that he should be laughed at by his friends for his folly, he did not altogether object to the amusing *rôle* of invalid. For his hostess had sent for the brandy which she administered without more ado, and which

he took obediently, feeling invigorated in more senses than one, so that it was a little difficult to conceal the extent to which his risible faculties were tickled. And now that the uncompromising frown had disappeared from Miss Deveril's brow, he had leisure to study her beauty, and found it had not been exaggerated. He assumed a gravity which he did not feel in the character of a "chiel takin' notes" which he determined to carry home to his womenfolk. Manlike, he could not have described her dress, but he noticed that it was well fitting and of some pretty and suitable material.

"Odd! She is more like an impulsive child than an educated woman," he thought, as he fell into the humour of the thing, stretching his long legs on the morocco leather, and sipping the brandy and water out of a silver cup.

The room was a simple one, for this girl who had returned from San Francisco, and who remained such a mystery to her neighbours, was not, after all, so

very rich. The fortune which had been left to her by the old "money-grubber" of an uncle, as his neighbours called him, was not larger, nor so large, as that which would come to her neighbour, Ralph Carlyon, and the Carlyons considered themselves to be decidedly poor. Yet everything was better arranged than might have been expected, by the leather merchant's niece.

The glittering glass, and the shining silver on the carved oak sideboard were in keeping with the cheerful movements and pleasant manners of her servants. There had been no chaperon in San Francisco, and if such a creature had dared to intrude on Polly, *alias* Azalea Deveril, she would have been speedily taught her duty, or kept in her proper place. The best chaperons in England were surely those who took no notice of their charges and their behaviour? But when Azalea—scarcely as yet used to the new name she had adopted—returned to England, she had determined to have no companion; it might not be

safe to have one. It had all seemed strange and uncanny at first, like a story in a play in which she was the principal actor—or a thing in the “Arabian Nights.” But how was it to end? It had not proved half so enjoyable as she had expected it to be. The silence had seemed to her terrible, till she made friends and allies of her servants, the sound of whose footsteps and laughter at a distance had first of all jarred on her nerves.

A country house in which a sociable woman is shut up alone may prove to the unaccustomed luxurious and comfortable, but, after all, it was somewhat wearisome. And so she had worked with her maidens, and superintended her men, till, all unknown to herself, the domestic interior bore a strange resemblance to the old patriarchal or tribal life.

Her castle was not a large one, still to her it was a castle. And to be isolated in a sort of castle, away from any city, or from masses of humanity; perched up in a kind of queenship; surrounded by

one's own land; and afraid to venture out for fear of encountering wild beasts who might pounce on one and tear one to pieces—or, in other words, proclaim one to be a fraud—was not an enlivening experience. There was not much pleasure in reigning, after all. For Polly—*alias* Azalea, or, as she preferred to call herself, Lea—was given to feel things vehemently. And though her “land” was somewhat limited, it made her shudder now and then, when she got depressed, to remember that six feet or less of land in this grey-skied England—she measuring only five foot four—must serve her for her grave, and that she could carry none of her present possessions away with her when she died. She had no love for tortuous ways or unfathomable silences which had never been hers before, but which seemed to grow on her by custom, and she made in vain ambitious plans for reading, to be carried on without a master.

Sometimes she wished she had been buried in the other Azalea's grave, or had stayed behind to marry

“Big Ben.” But Polly had been always a practical soul, and she meant to be practical now, considering that when a thing was done, and it was impossible to go back, she had to make the best of it. She had never really wished to go back. “Oh, no !” she said to herself, “I could never have gone back to those evenings with the empty grates, burnt puddings, and badly-cooked potatoes.”

Conscience did not trouble her, simply because she had not as yet developed a conscience ; but misgivings occasionally interfered with her comfort. Persons coming to pry were to be kept out of her domain. Women in particular were to be kept at arm's length, for women always found each other out ; but she began to wonder whether she need be quite so particular about men. She wondered more especially when she parted from Ralph Carlyon, not being very sorry in her secret heart, when she reflected how difficult it would be to prevent any further association with one whom she had once admitted to her house,

and treated like a disabled man. Perhaps he had not hurt himself so much as she had fancied. At any rate, he had turned white when he had hurt his hand—it did not occur to her that his offended dignity might have made him white. Polly was impulsive as well as practical, and she blamed herself for stupidity in allowing herself to be conquered by an unnecessary ebullition of feeling, now that it was too late. It might lead to awkward complications.

Perhaps she was not wrong, for, afterwards, in the evening, Ralph gave an account of the episode to his sister. “Depend upon it she is getting tired of solitude,” he said, quoting humourously, “‘I am half sick of shadows, said the Lady of Shalott.’” And then he added more gravely, “All the things we have heard about her seem to be wide of the mark; she is not in the least like the girl I expected to see. If I had not seen her, I should have imagined her to be more like a man than a pretty little girl. But, after all, it is astonishing to see the way in which

she manages her own affairs. So powerful a nature seems to have no right to lodge in so slender a frame."

Phillis Carlyon, who was a few years his senior and nearer forty than thirty, answered sharply, "All the stories that I hear of her are unwomanly and unseemly. She is one of the atheistical, self-assertive women who never enter a church."

"I dare say there are lots of ways of accounting for that. She has no mother and no friends, and has lived all her life in the Colonies." (Polly had thought it safer to say vaguely that she came from the Colonies.) "There seems to be a sort of mystery about her."

He did not add that it was the "sort of mystery" as he expressed it, which she kept up about her past life which helped to captivate his imagination, as if beyond the outward fascination which had attracted him was an inner shrine that no man might invade. His sister—a somewhat angular old maid, whose features, always of the aquiline type, had now become sharp as those of an eagle—was not exactly the person

to whom he could make confidences of this kind.

Miss Carlyon only muttered that she did not hold with such "nonsense." Neither was she singular in her opinion, for every family in the neighbourhood was strongly prejudiced against the new-comer. The hospitalities of the little house, in which the so-called Azalea lived, had been profuse in the case of some former owners—who had inhabited it before the advent of the leather merchant—and when it became known that its new proprietor—an unmarried woman—intended to live alone and to close her doors to all outsiders, the country world around her not only gave vent to its indignation, but discovered in the affront which had been put upon it a reason for a scandal.

Nothing is so likely to cause a revulsion of feeling, as the refusal of kindness from these who intend to patronize. And more than one of the good-natured families in the neighbourhood had intended to patronize Azalea. They had had no such desire to make friends with the old uncle, and were rather glad

than otherwise that the house should be shut up for a part of the week while he owned it, and that he only visited it on Sundays. But the niece who came from a distance was different, and could be treated with kindly indulgence as a lonely and marriageable girl, whose mother was reported to have been a perfect lady.

Things had been rather tame in the neighbourhood of Forest Hill. A loss of property had compelled Lord Riversley to put down his pack of hounds, and various misfortunes had occurred in other family circles, plunging them into mourning. It had not been a good year, and, indeed, things had been dull for a couple of years. There were potent reasons why the Carlyons themselves should refrain from indulging in their usual festivities, for old Mr. Carlyon was not only well stricken in years, but ailing and weak, and he also had had considerable money losses. It had been none the less kind of Phillis Carlyon to offer to get Azalea Deveril a class in the Sunday-school on the occasion of her first arrival.

It is needless to say that her offer was refused, a refusal which became charged with meaning when it was understood that the friendless girl did not even intend to take sittings in the parish church; so that, after a time, her appearance, which had been looked forward to with a flutter of expectation, came to be spoken of with bated breath.

Older women who had been ready to take her by the hand, considering that she had no mother—poor thing!—and was not likely to come in the way of their own girls, as she had so few advantages, were taken aback at her indifference and unconventionality in shutting herself up without a chaperon. She had only twice been seen walking out of her own grounds, and then she had been veiled. And though as far as they could judge she had a pretty face, that pretty face was considered, under the circumstances, to be an extra disadvantage.

It was the fashion to shake the head when Miss Deveril was mentioned, and Phillis shook hers now.

She always spoke of her as a "poor misguided creature," monopolizing for her sex the sort of license which belonged to men.

"Women give her the cold shoulder," she said, "and they would not do it without a reason. I've seen them turn round and avoid looking at her, even when she drives past them."

"Because she began by giving the cold shoulder to *them*. But if she were to mix in society she would soon live that down," laughed Ralph in reply. "Why are you so hard, Phillis?"

"She is a person with whom I could not have the least sympathy."

He laughed again, in a way she did not like.

"You men are so slow in finding people out," she retorted.

"Women can tell at a glance by intuition," he answered enigmatically, still chuckling to himself, "I will take Eleanor to call on her; Eleanor is always kind."

"There will be an *esclandre* some day, and then you will be very sorry to have mixed yourself up with her—take my word for it," said his sister sharply.

How a man so very eligible, so highly presentable, and so important in the neighbourhood as her brother, could "let himself down" by visiting such a person, was to Phillis incredible. For Ralph had always been one of those eminently good and highly respectable men whose taste in the matter of women was unimpeachable. Though his father had been a horsey man, and devoted to hunting as long as he had been able to sit on a horse, and though horses had ever been sources of interest to, and more or less the vocation of, the men of the Carlyon family, Ralph had never liked girls who were given to stable-talk. He had not even cared for emancipated women, but good women like his sister Phillis and his cousin Eleanor—women who went much to church, visited the poor people, and taught in Sunday-schools—women who were supposed to be the salt of the earth—had hither-

to been the women most affected by Ralph. He had never set himself in open opposition to a pet theory of his father's, that Eleanor, the favourite niece, whom the Squire had adopted on the death of his widowed sister, many years before, and who was consequently always with her cousin in the house, would make a suitable wife for him by and by. The idea was in the air, rather than openly given out, and as the old man, even in his dotage, had the good taste never to speak of it before the two who were most concerned, neither of them felt bound to take any notice of it.

But that Ralph, who had been always supposed to care for one whose life was so excellently ordered as Eleanor's, could be smitten by the attractions of a siren from the Colonies, brought up, not as other women are brought up, and possibly fed on godless philosophies, was a thought that Phillis refused to entertain. No young woman could choose such a singular course of life had there not been some reason in the background for it. She would not be so mad

as to deal an unnecessary blow at her popularity in the neighbourhood, by refusing herself to people like Miss Carlyon and Eleanor Hudson, unless she had doomed herself to imprisonment because she was certain she would be a failure.

"We called once, and she made an excuse; you must perfectly well know that we can never call again."

"I do not ask you, but I mean to go myself. You women may have your rules, your laws of society, your little etiquettes, but you cannot expect us men to be always bound by them."

"I cannot understand why you should be always asking for information about her—a girl who says she comes from the Colonies, whose antecedents are doubtless queer, who chooses to shut herself up, and never to go near a place of worship," rejoined Phillis hotly. "I am afraid you have been taken in by her airs and graces."

"And I cannot understand why you women should

be always hard on each other. A woman should never run down other women," he said, a little severely. "Eleanor would never do that. It is the low opinion of her sex which Nellie always resents, not only for herself but for other women."

CHAPTER III.

QUEEN OF ALL SHE SURVEYED.

POLLY was more restless than usual that evening. For a little while the wonder of her new hiding-place, with all the associations of the extraordinary old country; the vistas of the centuries stretching out behind her; the breath of the strange new air; the greyer climate; the passing clouds, and the glories of the sea which she had crossed to reach it—supplied her with food enough to satisfy her in her life of retirement.

Her own grounds were not large, but they commanded perfect views. And for that little while the lovely prospect had a quieting influence—as if a soft,

unseen hand stole over her, smoothing the hair on her brow. She had fretted a good deal for her girlish friend, but soon she began to console herself, like a child with toys. The girl from the Colonies loved everything because all was so novel to her. The great trees with soft round heads, which looked as if one could stroke them in the distance, were loveliest when seen from her windows. She had watched them in their various aspects—when the sun had caught some of their heads and turned their hair into gold; when in the shades of evening they became dusky green; or when, as now, in the autumn days, they assumed all sorts of chromatic tints.

All was delightful in the garden when it had been handed over by the former owners, from the peacock which had been encouraged to unfold its gorgeous plumes on the old stone terrace, the pug dog glad to welcome a friend, the sun sparkling on the diamond casements of the windows, the little old-fashioned sundial, and the one time-stained old fountain in

imitation of the French style, with its poor little Cupids in stone, defaced by time, with an arm or leg missing here and there, but smiling as the water trickled above their heads, dimpled still, but blackened and moss-grown in the course of years.

But she was getting very tired of watching them in loneliness. A year and a half seem like ages when one is young, and Polly began to feel as if the hair on her head must be growing grey. The rocks of candied sugar were turning into hard aggressive rocks, shutting her out from her fellow-creatures; the showers of dew perfumed with vanilla, were proving to be cold saturating rain. For if the Castle were enchanted at all, it was only enchanted in a horrible sense. It was as if she had lived alone in this place with her few serving-men and serving-maids for centuries and centuries. And the pride—really a form of distrust—with which she had checked all approach to neighbourly feeling, and which had proved so difficult to break down, was costing her more than she had counted on.

Beyond the mere fact of having made up her mind to personate her friend, she had no cause for self-reproach. She had begun her new life with a firm determination, God helping her, to keep it henceforth pure and true and clean. If she had not gone to church it was partly because she was afraid of the notice she might attract, and partly because she had never been used to it, and it was more natural to her to absent herself. But she was beginning to be like a child playing at hide-and-seek, shut up in a strange room, who, when its companions do not find it, feels as if it must call out. The ghastly dulness was becoming intolerable.

And when Ralph Carlyon came again—as he had said he would come, having intimated that seeing her once should mean, in his case, seeing her often—when he sought another opportunity, bringing a message extracted from his unwilling sister, she was rather thankful to him than otherwise for breaking down a cold reserve which was by no means natural

to her. He had positively persuaded Eleanor to accompany him, she falling into his vein, and declaring, in spite of Phillis, that she did not see why she or any other sensible woman should give way to the whims of this royal personage.

The "royal personage" was certainly unconventional, for she insisted on showing Miss Hudson round the house. She had odd new views about the future of England, and talked of the time when all the great houses would disappear, and the fine collections of china and pictures come under the hammer of the auctioneer.

Her own apartments were somewhat severely furnished, for the uncle had invested largely in mahogany, massive in style, and as Eleanor thought "bourgeois." But the girl had evidently good taste. For in passing through London she had bought herself a lamp supported by a little bronze Hermes, a copy of the celebrated Mercury of Bologna. It gave her an idea of the joy and vigour of youth; she, too, felt as if she

would have liked winged feet, to fly away from the prison she had made for herself by her own craft.

"It shows that the taste is there, and will only require cultivation," said Eleanor afterwards, hoping to propitiate Phillis.

Eleanor brought a peace-offering of some autumn chrysanthemums—curled darlings of the Japanese variety—with a message of thanks to Miss Deveril for her attention to the bruised hand.

They had had a good deal of fun over the supposed injury which was done to that hand. Miss Deveril's belief in the injury was evidently so ingenuous that it could not be pretended.

But Miss Deveril had quick perceptions, for she turned the conversation into another groove at once, and began to inveigh against the hunting propensities of her neighbours.

"They don't often start a fox, and have to be content with hares," explained Eleanor, and then Polly had her say.

The fox, she declared, was a most intelligent creature with all its wild instincts and clever ways, and turning to Ralph with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, she made him feel rather foolish by demanding, "Why on earth should you want to kill it?" Her manner implied that few animals with any intelligence were left in this dreary old England. "They caught a baby fox," she said, "soon after I came here, and it was pretty enough to see the little thing, with its tiny claws, burrowing a hole for itself beneath the cage. But I—I let it go free. I have a sympathy with that fox. How do I know it may not be the very one you will be trying to kill the next time you go to the meet? Oh, I know—I have heard that not to be constantly booted and spurred is to be subject to reproach in this place! *I think spurs are cruel things!*"

There was a dead silence, which she was the first to break by adding,

"You get so used to cruelty you never think of it. Oh, I dare say walking with the guns may become a

fashionable amusement, but never for *me*. I should hate to see creatures maimed and tortured."

Ralph hastened to assure her that his cousin Eleanor belonged to a Society for protecting animals, and that she was also an admirer of St. Francis of Assisi, of whom Miss Deveril had evidently never heard. But though he assured her that he never meant to carry on any further raids into her preserves, and was only too anxious to apologize for the one which she resented, he could not prevent her from enlarging on her sympathy for hunted things.

According to her, the women as well as the foxes were cruelly oppressed by the things which men not only allowed, but encouraged in the old country.

"A man does not give up his whole life for the sake of being married, and why should a woman?" she asked impulsively, chattering on, regardless of the bad impression she was producing.

Eleanor did not know what to make of this girl, whose ways were so different from her own ways,

and who alternately delighted and frightened her. It was like coming in contact with a being from another planet.

The extreme colourlessness of Miss Hudson's appearance, her delicacy, her perfect finish, and even her femininity—in a peculiar sense not common with many women—were brought into strong relief by her contrast with Polly.

"You are too young to be so much alone," was the only speech she made which savoured of patronizing, and then—conscious of the feeling of stand-offishness—she hastened to correct her mistake by an encouraging smile, which broadened into a laugh when Miss Deveril suddenly presented a little box of bonbons, having a red-turbaned lady with red cheeks pictured on its lid, and—holding it out to her visitors—began to munch the contents herself, as she explained,

"I always carry sweets in my pocket—the worst of it is that—with the way the dressmakers make the dresses now—they are sometimes hard to sit upon."

She was afraid in her turn that she had committed some terrible solecism, when Ralph—looking at the odd expression of perplexity in Eleanor's eyes with the answering fright in those of his hostess—burst into a laugh, and the laughter threatened to become uncontrollable.

Polly joined in it herself—afraid all the time that it might not be the right thing to do. She had always offered chocolates as a sign of amity to Ben and Dick, when she had wished to propitiate them, but evidently it was not proper here.

"One must live and learn," thought Polly, with a sigh.

Eleanor went away admitting to herself that the stranger was charming in spite of her shortcomings, and in spite of her divergence from herself in opinion and habit.

"She is not like anyone else," she said, "she fascinated me a good deal, but she was not at her ease any more than I was."

She did not think it necessary to explain that the stranger had repelled her at the same time, and that even she, though she did not know it, spoke with condescension, while Phillis's nose and chin seemed to grow sharper at the very mention of the visit. What good could come from cultivating the acquaintance of a wild girl from the Colonies, who at one time determined to shut herself up, and at another was, perhaps, too ready to make friends?

"She is something of a beauty," explained Eleanor; "so far the gossip is right. She is just the sort of woman who would have the incense swung for her if she went much into society. And she is so original; I could imagine her being the rage in London."

Eleanor spoke a little sadly. She was conscious herself of being no beauty, though there was something striking in her personality, and many people were strongly drawn to the fair, pale woman, no longer in her first youth, the lines of whose figure were thin and angular, and whose face was often likened to that

of a mediæval saint. Neither of the two relatives suspected that it was not so much Miss Deveril's beauty as Miss Deveril's fascination which had attracted Ralph Carlyon. From the moment that the man and the woman had stood face to face, he had been conscious that something fresh and charming had come into his life, a new influence which was to permeate his whole being, and possibly revolutionize some of his previous theories.

Phillis and Eleanor would have been much more anxious if they could have known how often, during the next few weeks, Ralph was to be a visitor at Woodlands. Polly's grace of maidenhood, her freshness, her *naïveté* when she threw off her odd mask of reserve, were all telling upon him. The lilt of her clear young voice singing to herself, or giving orders to her gardener as she walked about her grounds—for she led an open-air life, and received Ralph generally in the open air—even her habit of breaking into boyish whistling; the thousand little

smiles which seemed to lurk in the dimples on her cheek or in the corners of the red lips—were pleasant to him. He observed and noted them all with a quick sense of humour, which was one of the greatest pleasures of his life, though it rarely moved him to the outward expression of laughter. And, unimaginative though he usually was, he fell into the habit of creating for Miss Deveril all the qualities which her face and bearing suggested to him.

By degrees he tempted her out of her solitude, so gradually and so gently that she was scarcely aware of the change. "Don't you find it very dull?" he began by remonstrating. "When other people lived here there was plenty of life about the place."

"I have made friends of my servants," she tried to explain, enlarging on one of those views of life which had the charm of novelty to him; "they say we women like being slaves, and that we are hard in our turn to other women, sometimes even to children and those beneath us. That may be the fashion in

England, but I have not been used to it. My people all love me. I dance with them, I sing to them. I remember their independence as human beings."

"Where did you pick up all this Radicalism?" laughed her neighbour, without noticing that his inquiries were never answered. There was a freshness in the pretty pedantry with which she brought out these opinions which completely subjugated him. But by degrees he laughed her out of some of her ideas. It was all very well—that theory of living like a female Robinson Crusoe, monarch of all she surveyed—but it was rather hard on her neighbours. If she could have had her way, she would have allowed the rabbits, the hares, the partridges, and the pheasants to breed undisturbed. As to any outsider daring to shoot on her little property, it had been worse to her than the audacity of the keeper in trying to keep the increase down, and more unpardonable than the gardener who had wished to cut down timber without consulting her. But, after all, this was tyran-

nical in a sporting country. What could be greater tyranny from one who prided herself on resisting tyrants? She found all her arguments suddenly turned against herself, and laughed good-temperedly when she was assured that it was she who had been the tyrant.

Yet everyone noticed that Ralph Carlyon was less keen on the hunting and shooting that season.

"She has been doing her best to open my eyes to my shortcomings," he admitted, "I have half a mind never to shoot anything again—to let the pheasants and partridges multiply as well as the foxes."

But at the same time Ralph was a masterful man, and it was ominous to Phillis when he added, with grim emphasis,

"I am determined to try and cure her of shutting herself up. She may be taking a right step in the direction of female emancipation, but why should the emancipated woman refuse to see her friends?"

Whether he were in earnest or in fun, it was evident that the "Lady of Shalott," was not to be allowed to languish any longer in retirement.

CHAPTER IV.

"MY COUSIN ELEANOR."

NEW thoughts and strange feelings were surging up in Polly's heart. She tried to put them away from her by an effort of her will ; but they were not unpleasant thoughts.

She had not wasted her time during the eighteen months she had lived alone. Directly she came to England she began to study other women, and was particularly anxious to acquire the "well-groomed" appearance of the English girls who sometimes drove past her gates, the girls who belonged to the county families in the neighbourhood, and who looked as neat as their sleek and glossy horses and well-appointed

carriages. She had denied herself to all of them, partly because she was afraid of their discerning something peculiar in her. The essentials of knowing how to carry herself and how to walk gracefully had been learned long ago, and she had always prided herself on being able to dress with effect, but in the dress as in the walk she had now to correct all that was stagey. Her quick perception told her that the peculiar style of these other women was something different from theatrical smartness. She had determined to acquire it, discarding the diamonds and gold bangles which she had bought on first landing in England, wearing spotless cuffs and collars, and neat little boots, which were kept without a crease by being constantly stretched on boot-trees. She had even tried to brush the waves and crinkles out of her rebellious hair, preserving her own secret as to the wash which she again began to apply to it at nights, to keep it as nearly as possible to the canary colour of Azalea's tresses.

But still she was terribly afraid of those other girls.

She had been afraid of them all the time that she had lived alone, with a sort of feeling of having gone back to the Middle Ages.

It seemed to her in a vague manner as if, in another incarnation, she must have experienced that sensation of being shut up with her workpeople. But then, no doubt, in that former stage of existence, she had worked at tapestry with her maidens, and had beguiled the weary hours not only with women's talk, but also with knightly guests. Could it have been any duller—that working at tapestry, when one could not even see the pattern, but had to stitch in the threads at the back of the embroidery—than the lonely, weary hours with no knightly guests? It was disagreeable as well as dull to be a *chatelaine* without guests, and a prisoner in one's own grounds. The affection of her faithful attendants, and the pleasant air of the country with the outlook from her windows on the giant trees—immemorial elms and oaks, with the moss of centuries on their trunks—had palled on her after a time.

For, oh, it had been dull! And as Polly would have said of herself in the old days, she was "a gregarious animal," and, after all, could not help being thankful to have the spell of the enchanted solitude broken at last, and to be able to yield unconsciously to the desire which every woman has in moments of weakness, to shift the burden of her life on to the shoulders of some man. And, curiously enough, she did not resent the interference—not even when Ralph tried to revise her theories about womankind. Women, as he insisted, knew their power in past days; they were the inventors of the ideal, and believed in their own illusions. They were the poets of unwritten poetry; the priestesses of the occult. Now they were in danger of throwing away the bone for the shadow. Polly shook her head, but he had set her thinking, and in that lay the path to danger. She had never yet cared for a man, though she had loved a woman wildly and passionately, with all the fervour of her passionate heart. She had resented

the sickly sentimentality, which is so prone to exaggerate one stage of human life. But now, for the first time, she knew the meaning of thoughtful sympathy, and of mental ambition. The thoughts which had been lying useless till fired by the thoughts of others, like dead coals ready to take flame when the burning wood should reach them, suddenly started into life.

And the poor lonely girl had a feeling, which she tried in vain to shake off, that she—the independent, the self-sufficing, who had fled across the seas to escape an unwelcome lover—had somehow need of this plain-spoken, dominating man, of his presence, his smiles, his encouragement, and even his help.

Was it because the men whom she had known before, had only been burlesques and caricatures of the refined type which they tried to mimic, or could it be possible that the domesticity which had always excited her irony was beginning to be necessary to herself?

Certain it was that Ralph Carlyon's open face, his

expressive grey eyes, his cheerful candour, and his pleasant manner contrasted strangely with remembrances of hard-featured men in " 'Frisco " taverns—men with bowie-knives and revolvers in their belts. His was an impressive figure, and the graver tones of his voice had begun to thrill her in a way which she found it difficult to resist. In her presence he was always careful, and full of self-restraint. To serve God and be a respectable member of the Church of England, keeping any doubts which might trouble him locked in his own breast, whilst he did his duty by his family and the land which had belonged to his forefathers for generations, was the simple creed in which Ralph Carlyon had been educated. And if there was another side to his character, a phase in which he found congenial food in reading Renan and Herbert Spencer, and writing letters to thoughtful friends who had souls above mangel-wurzels, turnips and top-dressings, it was a phase which he kept to himself, being only known to his neighbours under the character

of the future squire—a good-natured man to deal with when "you didn't tread on his corns"—"a real kind man" said the farmers round,—"but if you once opposed him, you warn't likely to do it twice."

Meanwhile Polly was a good deal impressed by everything about him. The "Hall" was the oldest mansion in the neighbourhood of Forest Hill, having been built long before London—stealthily creeping on—invaded the suburbs—an invasion of which the Carlyons spoke, as if it were an incursion of Goths and Vandals. It was a couple of centuries older than the unassuming house which the leather merchant had purchased. It had been added to from time to time, throwing out a gable here, and a picturesque chimney there, till the ancestral home had become a medley of all sorts of architecture interesting to the artist and antiquarian. The grey façade and its black shadows chilled Miss Deveril when she summoned up courage to return Eleanor Hudson's visit.

She had screwed up her resolution to make the

call, but felt inclined to draw back when a hard-featured butler, who looked as if he would never see sixty again, ushered her up a massive staircase, with stern-eyed family portraits on its walls, into a drawing-room cold, intimidating, and furnished in prim style, and, finally, into the presence of an equally hard-featured mistress of an equally uncertain age, whom she correctly guessed to be Miss Carlyon.

But she had determined to like Phillis, whom somebody had described to her as a homespun sort of woman whom it was absurd to be afraid of, and of whom Ralph had said with a smile, "We leave her the monopoly of all the virtues. She is one of the people who are always in the right, and not popular in consequence; perfect goodness being exasperating. But when you come to know her you will be sure to like her."

His manner had perhaps implied that the great thing in a woman was to be pliant and amenable to circumstances, but Polly did not as yet take

alarm at this manner. And she took to Phillis, she scarcely knew why, perhaps because the maiden sister had the same steady, earnest look in her dark grey eyes as Ralph had in his, but she did not admire her. Miss Carlyon's face was honest, clever, keen looking, sarcastically sharp, and undeniably plain. Girl-like she had concluded that Eleanor Hudson was also plain, and that the worthy people who had circulated reports to the effect that there was a secret understanding between the cousins must certainly be mistaken. For if Phillis was matter-of-fact and somewhat angular in form, with the outlines of old maidenhood, Eleanor also was undeniably thin, with high cheek bones, a little flat chested, and prematurely faded.

"There can be nothing in all that chatter; have I not heard that they always gossip in country places like this, in England?" said Polly to herself, walking on to her fate like a somnambulist, impressed for the first time by a new personality, almost hypnotized by the strange and unexpected influences which were

brought to bear upon her, astonished at herself and the fresh possibilities which from day to day were discovered in her.

Ralph Carlyon could scarcely have explained why his feet so often wandered in the direction of his neighbour's house. They read together—first prose, then poetry; he selecting such passages as she would be likely to understand.

It was plain enough, as he acknowledged, that her education had been neglected. But she was enthusiastic and had taught herself a good deal, and, after all, he declared, she knew more than the generality of girls who pretended to know so much, but who might have been born before Cadmus for any real knowledge that they had of letters. He set himself to remedy her defects to the best of his power.

He corrected her mistakes—some of them were odd. She said she came from the Colonies, but he had to correct her Americanisms; that was accounted for by her explanation that she had lived for some

time in America. He tried to make her think ; it seemed to him horribly discourteous, but he hastened to apologize for the discourtesy by complimenting her on the rapid strides which she was making in consequence of her native wit and her quick intelligence.

She would not talk of her experiences.

Old thoughts were evidently put more into the background as new ones monopolized, and the recollection of all the things which she had seen in her past life seemed somehow to oppress her.

This was strange, and he admitted that many other things were strange about her ; he grew intimate enough to be able to laugh at her for her oddities. She did not, for instance, trouble herself much about time. The watches stood still which she wore as ornaments, the clocks in her house were left unwound. She declared that she knew the time by the length of the shadows, but the servants, of whose attachment she boasted, took advantage of her, and sometimes the whole household sat up far into the night. And Ralph

Carlyon—who could not bear to hear her habits laughed at as eccentric—began by winding up the clocks and ended by winding up something else.

She showed him the books which she had tried in vain to read by herself, and consulted him about them. It was inconsistent with her Radicalism and her strong opinions about the independence of women that she should take his advice—but Polly was still a mass of inconsistencies.

She was the first woman he had ever known who seemed to have released herself from the bonds of the conventional. And if she were uneducated in some respects, she was oddly cultivated in other ways. She had learnt a good deal from the book of Nature, and she was happy in queer quotations from dramatic authors, and sometimes from French writers. He could not help wondering how she—so ignorant in other respects—had got hold of them.

Then it was that by insensible degrees, and for subtle reasons which she could best explain, she thought

it well to change the code which she had laid down for herself and intended to be as infallible as the laws of the Medes and Persians; for, having once admitted a masculine intruder, it was difficult to exclude other neighbours. Phillis came, and tried to be friendly, but she had not tact enough to control her inclination to lecture, and she was the first to be alarmed at the jokes which were made in the neighbourhood, on the subject of her brother's constant visits to the lonely house which Polly had christened Woodlands. Phillis had always been on good terms with her brother, but she was one of those conscientious people who are apt to make themselves disagreeable from their excessive confidence in themselves.

"You always think yourself in the right," said Ralph, when she tried to remonstrate with him, "and as I have never been able to disturb you in the stronghold of your position, I will not attempt to do so now. But for Heaven's sake let your remarks be limited to myself—there is nothing inferior about this girl."

To Eleanor he spoke more freely.

"Study! she asks me to help her study. It is really almost a pity, for she is charming as she is—charming as one of Nature's wild flowers. She knows a little about dress, and a good deal about dancing. She has a mass of curious ideas—a jumble of poetry which sometimes she quotes, and invariably fastens on the wrong people—all of this is most fresh and amusing."

And then he added, laughing,

"She knows nothing about the history of her own times. One would think she had been asleep—a sort of female Rip Van Winkle—only she looks so juvenile and has the oddest ideas about politics. And she has her antipathies; she hates geography like poison."

He laughed again, little guessing that Polly's hatred of geography was due to her horror of being questioned about Australia. He was too much amused to be on his guard; it was already dawning on him that what the other women might think foolishness and childishness in the "Lady of Shalott" were, in fact, freshness

and originality, and that his own life had been half benumbed before he knew her.

But to Polly, when the intimacy increased, he ventured to explain, "You are the sort of girl to whom all hypocrisies would be hateful, but you must not judge more conventional people by yourself. I am sure you will love my sister and cousin when you come to know them. My sister is really not a woman to be dreaded—"

"Though she *does* take me for a sort of heathen Chineese," laughed the girl.

"Why, if you had remained here any longer shut up by yourself, no one knows what you *might* have turned into," rejoined Ralph, answering her according to her own humour, but with just a touch of his sister's middle-aged self-complacency. He was very well aware that her mind was growing rapidly under his direction, and though, in spite of her usual frankness, she kept certain memories to herself, he was by no means alarmed at her reticence.

"What does anybody know about her?" asked Phillis, angrily.

And Eleanor, on whom she pressed the question, was bound to admit that there was something about the girl which she did not quite understand.

"I should think not, indeed. How could anyone understand?" retorted Phillis, undeterred by the remembrance of her brother's warning, that if she allowed herself to make innuendoes at the expense of other people some day or other they would degenerate into libels.

But Eleanor, who was very hard at work amongst her poor people, only answered her with a sweet and somewhat sickly smile. No one had much time to notice Eleanor's looks, or to remark that she was growing thinner and paler. Her soft, fair eyelids did not as yet show the traces of tears, or the anguish of night-watches when she had to conquer herself. Eleanor was much at church just then, though, unlike Phillis, she did not bore people with her talk about church services.

"My cousin Eleanor is really most kind, though her manners are a little cold," said Ralph Carlyon, somewhat anxiously. "We are a good deal to each other, having been brought up together since childhood."

It had always been his way quietly to ignore any cut-and-dried schemes which his father might have made on his behalf; he considered it far more polite to the lady to ignore them. By long habit, he continued coolly to treat these questions as if they had never existed, without taking the trouble to argue about them, or to contradict them, but owing to this habit, which saved him a good deal of worry, he was perhaps answerable for some of the trouble which might have been prevented.

CHAPTER V.

OFF HER GUARD.

No one knew exactly how it came about!—how the girl who felt the need for studying in her leisure hours with all her energy and zest—aware of the enormous gaps in her knowledge, which must be filled before she could take her place amongst other educated women—came to depend more and more on the help of a friend! And how for the first time, finding in the eyes of a human being the annihilation of self—as if her personality had been merged in the being of another—she was almost afraid of his coming lest his breath should fan into flames those sparks of which she was beginning to be conscious amongst the dead embers of her heart!

It was insensate, absurd.

"I must be on my guard; I must be on my guard. It will not do for me to marry *anyone*," she was in the habit of repeating, as if by rote, to herself. But the words had lost their meaning.

She had always believed in hypnotism, and was sure she was being hypnotized. She tried to assert her will, and to rehearse to herself all the theories against the domination of man, which had hitherto occurred so readily to her mind. But when Ralph came again—this good and precise man whom it was madness for her to love—she seemed to have forgotten all her theories and had only a helpless sense of being conquered.

He, too, was caught in a network of his own fancies. It was not till later that he found how he had invented all sorts of attributes for Miss Deveril, and how little she had said or done to confirm him in his ideas. Afterwards, he remembered how she had been outspoken and a little abrupt, with no delicate

comprehension of difficult questions, such as is usual amongst English-bred girls, but with a downright way of speaking, as if it were impossible for her to understand why subjects should be tabooed for girls on which men or even mature women could discourse amongst themselves. More than once some remark of hers had made him start—a chance remark which had seemed to justify Phillis in being contemptuous about the new and fantastic relationship which was being established between her brother and this outlandish stranger from the Colonies—Phillis always declaring that she thought too well of Ralph to believe that anything could really come of it.

Phillis might have been a little comforted could she have known how the girl had declared, with flashing eyes, that she had determined to lead a single life, and it was utterly impossible for her ever to dream of marrying. “Utterly is a strong word,” Ralph had answered calmly, as he looked at her with the masterful smile which she tried in vain to resent. “You are

letting me teach you a little, and you will not be so discourteous as to refuse to let me show you how the verb '*Amo*' may be conjugated. At least you will let me try, and when I have failed it will be time enough for you to repeat 'utterly impossible.' "

He set himself to win her in a philosophical way, the first step being to wean her from any supposed eccentricity. For her manner was sometimes stilted, not only with him but in the presence of other visitors, whom she no longer excluded. And yet he knew how she longed for a burst of healthy laughter. "It seems to me," he said one day, "that you have good spirits and are always bottling them up. Why, if I may venture to ask? You could not have cared so much for that old uncle."

Again she flushed the brilliant red which had always dyed her cheeks, even to the little ears, when her new friend ventured to ask any question which referred to her past life—but she looked away from him.

"It is rather hard on a fellow not to let him put

the simplest and most civil question," he thought, for the first time with a sense of irritation, modified by that strange and secret conviction that it was one of the oddities which would all come right by and by. But even these oddities justified him in declaring to Phillis, "She is not commonplace at all, and you know how many of your sex are terribly commonplace."

If Polly did not absolutely "let herself go" after his remonstrance about her forced gravity, she became more like her old self. Now and then a sort of timidity would come over her in the midst of her sallies of wit, and an appealing air which contrasted piquantly with the assertion of her liberty. "A woman must be a fool," she said, "who, having tasted the sweets of liberty, would bow her neck to the yoke in this England of yours. Once fettered, I should do nothing but long for emancipation. Horrible—to think of giving up one's liberty."

He was nearer to her than he had been before. She felt it, for she dared not raise her eyes when he

was reading some familiar poem, and when she felt that he was taking possession of her. There was no withstanding the tender tone of his voice, cheering her and encouraging her. It seemed to her that since Azalca's death she had heard nothing so tender.

And yet she rattled on in what Phillis called her "American" style. How so many women could remain crushed under this conjugal tyranny without asserting themselves was incomprehensible to her, Polly declared. Miserable creatures, with rigid autocrats for their husbands—would no deliverance ever come to them? Marriage was egotism, a sort of dual egotism, she said, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders. "Oh, you can't want *that* of me—it can't be *that*," she cried, bursting into tears and thrusting him away with passionate sobs. And Ralph only smiled quietly in that provoking way of his. He had ceased to care if he vexed her, he even risked irritating her—anything to dominate her in the end. But it was a part of his philosophy to let her talk herself out.

She intended to be persistent in her refusal, but her opposition was only fanning his love into a flame. The possibility of disappointment in the long run did not occur to him ; so sure was he that it would only be a question of time. As to dismissal, he was determined not to take it. A man who had been humoured all his life by women, and who was conscious of having a great gift to give, was not easily disturbed when he set his mind on a thing.

The autumn changed into winter. The veils of mist, drawn, as if by invisible fingers, over the skies and rising from the fields and woods of Forest Hill, gave way to the sparkling silver of a reign of hoarfrost.

And then old Mr. Carlyon became seriously ill, and the weeks which had passed monotonously, without anything unusual happening but the discussing of agricultural improvements, or the reading of new books, were followed by a brief period of tragic and emotional interest. All that careful nursing and affectionate solicitude could do, was done, but Mr. Carlyon, in

consequence of his extreme age, was unable to throw off the cold which he had caught with the change of weather, and the doctors could only soothe his passage to the grave with opiates. The dying man slept for the greater part of the time, nor was it supposed that there could be any need for disturbing him to consult with him about his affairs. It was only on the opening of the Will that it was found he had indulged, in earlier years, in unwise speculations on the turf, and that the estate, unknown to his heir, was heavily mortgaged.

It was then remembered that the aged man had been heard to mutter something about mortgages and speculations, and that there had been compunction and a sort of appeal in his face, but that those who heard him had supposed him to be delirious. It was the old story of heavier expenses in spite of diminished income and unfortunate investments, and Ralph—who listened to the tale of these pecuniary embarrassments with a grim face—could not help remembering that

his father had not been the man to live without the comfort and show which he considered to be necessary to his position, and that his expenses had never been curtailed, though he knew himself to be in debt and continual difficulties.

“The place is not entailed, there is nothing to prevent me from selling it,” said the younger man, with that grim face when he heard that there was a mortgage even on the house.

But that was merely a threat. He was too much attached, as Phillis said, to every “stick and stone” to sell it. Yet so heavy were the liabilities, that it was considered better for a time to let the Hall and its grounds, and to sell off the horses—the utmost which Ralph Carlyon could hope for being to ensure a modest competence for himself and his female relations.

Then the state of things was suddenly altered. When the old father lay first ill and then dead, amongst the hallowed associations of the house which had

belonged to his ancestors, Ralph Carlyon had no idea of shirking his duties by any further visits to Woodlands. Before the Will was opened, and even when he was making all the arrangements for the funeral, the thought had entered into his mind of how well and pleasant it might be to associate the woman he loved with ideals as noble as his own, in all his schemes for the well-being of his poorer neighbours. Afterwards he mastered himself, deciding that he could not offer her a position as brilliant as she might be entitled to expect from her beauty and her fortune, moderate though that fortune was. The ties of kinship came first, and these could never cease to be binding; they had been so even in primitive communities.

He kept aloof from Woodlands, till he heard that Miss Deveril was ill.

CHAPTER VI.

POLLY ACTS ON ANOTHER IMPULSE.

THOUGH she had been making strenuous efforts to cultivate her intellect, Polly had not intended to awaken her slumbering conscience; she had not foreseen that the two were inseparably bound together. Once or twice during the time she had lived alone, her conscience had stirred in its slumber, as a chrysalis touched sharply may be made to stir in its wintry sleep, and then it had settled itself again to its former inertia.

“I have a right,” she said to herself. “The darling whom I loved would have left it all to me—she would have wished me to have it. And so long as

I keep my secret it hurts nobody else—though one thing is certain, I must never, *never* marry.”

But latterly she had not been so certain about leading a quiet, unwedded life. Since she had known Mr. Carlyon she had had to struggle more and more against ever-increasing temptation. Should her one sin shut her out from all that was enjoyable in existence?

One of her attractions towards Eleanor, who was singularly kind and gentle to her, had been a curious impulse to confession, a sort of idea that the delicate woman with her saintly face would never betray her confidence, and might even play the part of experienced sage to her ignorance. But as she grew more learned in the ways of the world she shrank from hypothetically putting her own case, waiting for any judicial or impartial verdict. Not only would it be too much like surrendering a part of herself—and she noticed that other people were in no haste to give themselves away by a foolish want of reticence—but she began to guess what the verdict would be, and

how her case would appear to outsiders. And as she guessed it, she suffered. Her reminiscences were bitter; they came upon her now and then like sharp twinges of neuralgic pain, though she managed generally to forget. She had glimpses of the time when the remembrance of what she had done might become like a perpetual blister applied to her self-esteem, hidden from the eyes of others, like the hair shirt of a saint, but always fretting her temper and poisoning her happiness. By a natural impulse she desired to ward off that time, and the longing in her secret heart to make her life a full one, with plenty to do, and plenty of delight, corresponded with her desire to shift her burden on someone stronger.

When she heard that the Carlyons had lost their money, and that Ralph intended to let the patrimonial house and live in a small way elsewhere, it occurred to her, by a new form of casuistry, that she might perhaps be useful in the emergency. Why should he not continue to lead the life of a country gentleman

—the life to which he had been always accustomed, and which evidently suited him beyond all others? If he could not afford to live any longer in his own house, why should he not continue to make use of hers; and why—between them—should they not make proper provision for the cousin and sister?

She had forgotten that she had thought this all out before, and had decided that such a marriage would be impossible.

She did not allow herself time to think, but made her plans in haste, giving out that she was seriously ill; her anxiety had, in fact, brought on a succession of sleepless nights, and she received Mr. Carlyon in a pretty, coquettish, invalid costume when he came to condole with her, and also to announce his intention of breaking up his establishment. His voice broke a little when he spoke of his sister, and he quickly changed the subject when Polly alluded to the collection of pictures which the Carlyons had boasted should never get into the hands of the dealers. "There is

not the least occasion," she said, "for you to part with them—you can be nearly as well off as before—and—and your sister too," this with a gulp, for the thought of Phillis at that moment was somewhat difficult to swallow, "and that dear Eleanor—don't you understand?"

He was not quite so quick at taking in her meaning as she would have liked him to be, for hitherto, though she had evidently not been unfavourable to him, he had always been discouraged by the mixture of emotions on her impressionable face. Her manner was no longer ungracious, but he did not understand the feverish glow which had come into the beautiful face, the light in her grey eyes, nor the sudden way in which she pressed her hand on her side as if to stop the beating of her agitated heart.

"Don't you understand—must I speak a little more plainly?" she asked, between laughing and crying—ignoring those troublesome pinpricks of which she had never been conscious till lately, but which other

people dignified by the name of conscience. "Don't you understand that I have enough for all—that is, if you will take a pupil in with the pictures and bric-à-brac, which needn't be sold, and teach her to conjugate that verb—what was it? I forget."

His eyes sought hers. Till now they had been averted as if by a conscious effort, and he looked to her, in his black suit and his attitude of melancholy dignity, like a sort of Hamlet and Ravenswood rolled into one. Hitherto she had generally seen him in shooting costume, or easy, comfortable clothes, dressed, as Phillis sometimes said, "more like a bushranger than anything else." And this carelessness of appearances had added to his age. Now, in his mourning suit, he looked even younger than his thirty-four years, "quite young enough to make a very good Hamlet on the stage," as she had been saying to herself, and yet hating herself for the old habit of looking at everything theatrically.

She herself was answerable for the sudden revulsion of

feeling, in which his staid and somewhat elderly manner was put off like a garment, as if incompatible with his virility. If he had looked young before, he looked ten years younger now, as his hand stole round her waist and he drew her to himself with an eager air of proprietorship. "My wife!" he said, "I had not dared to hope this."

And as his hand stole round her the touch went through her, as if she had been thrilled by some electric current. In the old days she would have told herself it was ridiculous, for then she had determined not to believe in galvanic batteries of that sort. Yet the involuntary remembrance came upon her, of how a kiss from the lips of another man had always revolted her, and filled her with aversion. Polly was changed into Lea; she was not the same person; yet the recollection dyed her cheeks with red and a sense of guilt. A tear of mortification stole down her face. Was she a creature of impulse, to be always dominated in this way by feelings, instead of the strong woman she had determined to be—the nineteenth century

woman's-rights woman who had nothing to do with moods?

She burst into a storm of sobs, pushing him aside. "No, no—not 'my wife' yet! You must promise me first. You must not question me about my life in—in—the Colonies. We were poor and we had to move about. Oh, it was innocent enough, but I went through so much that it sends me into a nervous fever to talk of it! The doctors say it is bad for me to allow my mind to dwell on it. And you must not try to fetter my liberty too much. Let me be free, free as the air. I cannot always stay here, sometimes I feel as if I cannot live in this place. No woman who really loves would be such a fool as to wish to fetter a *man*; you will not interfere with *me*, neither shall I with *you*," she said in her simplicity, little guessing what interpretation might afterwards be put upon her words.

But he gave no heed to them then, being ready in his haste to make any amount of promises. "I will leave you free as the air, I will never force your love; but remember, it is only love which sanctifies

this arrangement you would make with me. Could I be loaded with benefits from you, could I stoop to accept them—to go to live for a time in your house—think how ridiculous it would be—unless you were my *loving* wife?” he said, surveying her at a little distance with that masterful look, which had made her think sometimes that his chin was a trifle too long, like his sister Phillis’s, and the set of his lips too dogged, showing determination and will. But it was something to have reduced the masterful man to a state of passionate intensity, in which none of his friends would have recognized him.

For, as her sobs increased, and he could not bear to see her unhappy, he began to walk wildly about the room, ready to forget his usual prudence in the promises she asked of him. She was drawing on a bank of credit for which she would have to pay ruinous discount, for, after all, what were the promises which might have to be fulfilled, made in the rash heat of his passion, when he would have promised her anything?

CHAPTER VII.

SOMEBODY OUT IN THE COLD.

IN all this it was characteristic that no one had thought about the possibility of suffering for Eleanor. Not Phillis, who had never guessed that under her cousin's shrinking humility there might exist something of the ardour of youth or of desire for happiness, natural to her age. Not Ralph, who had always thought it better to ignore his father's whims by taking it for granted that Eleanor had a call to devote herself to a religious life, and to deeds of mercy and kindness to others.

Both were right in their idea that the frequent hints, given by the old squire, had been a source of annoyance and humiliation to his niece, and that she endured

them only because she could not resent them without ingratitude. Eleanor's quiet and contented manner, her sedateness, and her reserved attitude, which almost amounted to secrecy, were perpetual safeguards against the intrusion of curiosity from outsiders. From the time when she had arrived at the Hall, an orphan, almost a child, no one had noticed the infinite sadness in the eyes which gazed out at the meadows, broad and wide, amongst which the shadows crept, or at the deer, reposing in the bracken beneath the oak trees in the deer-park, which varied that meadow-land in which a great part of her uncle's property consisted. She was rightly supposed to be a great admirer of natural scenery, but the closest observer had never suspected that passion could grow out of such a placid beginning, or that Eleanor, who had been Ralph's companion from childhood, who had talked with him over his University prospects, and watched him in every trial or pleasure of his life, could be the sort of woman to cherish a sentimental attachment.

She was respected and esteemed because she confided in no one. More than once her hand had been sought in marriage, but she had dismissed her suitors.

"She is too good for any of us," Ralph had said to Phillis, as he noticed the increasing signs of ardent religious devotion which had been Eleanor's from the beginning, and which awed and astonished, though they did not personally impress him.

He could not understand anyone having such a vocation. The whole thing was beyond his grasp; he had no comprehension of it and could only admire it. He could say "Pray for me," when the girl went to her daily services with that beautiful saintly expression on her face, but he had no idea of going with her.

Both he and Phillis were right in their idea, that the frequent services in the church at Forest Hill had conduced to the happiness of her life. But no one had guessed the agonizing prayers and the emotional ups and downs of a girlhood of this sort.

Her scrupulous conscience had always rebuked her, for allowing herself privately to think of the possibility of the match which her uncle had proposed, as if for the intrusion of an unlawful thought. Humiliated in her own eyes by a secret weakness, she had sought to expiate it by such asceticism and retirement as could be reconciled with her adherence to the English Church. No one had the remotest suspicion how, beneath a smiling face which hid her acute sensibilities, Eleanor had been fighting with a great sorrow, unaided, and passing through the most humiliating grief a woman can endure, a grief which cuts through every fibre of dignity.

"The only comfort is that I alone have to suffer," she said, while a wave of great hopelessness went over her.

It mattered little to her that every nerve was jarred if she still managed to be simple, generous, and much enduring. And it signified still less, as she wrestled with her trouble, that the youth which

never lasts long was abridged by her acts of self-renunciation.

"It will be better as time goes on," she had always said to herself, when it had seemed as if brain and nerve would be injured by the strain; yes, she felt sure it would be better when she had got over the difficult period of youth.

She, who would not willingly let her self-love deceive her, had formed so low an idea of herself that she had an equally low idea of the folly of the world, and was determined never to be shocked by her fellow-creatures. To divert the earthly affection, which had betrayed her, into higher channels, and so to purify herself from earthly passions as to be able to seek God in the inmost recesses of a soul in which He might dwell, had become a desire so necessary to be combined with true humility that it had unconsciously exorcised the demon of self-righteousness.

From the time of her first interview with Polly,

she had a truer intuition into that woman's restlessness of character, and a truer sympathy for the inquiring spirit with which the reputed Lea would have to grapple with the numerous problems which would present themselves for her solution, than Phillis in her carping mood, or Ralph in the blindness of his affection. With the sensibility of heart which had hitherto been so little appreciated, Eleanor had determined never to allow herself to become a mere mystical recluse. There should be no misfortune which she would not seek to alleviate, no sorrow with which she would not sympathize, and no form of sin by which she would be alienated.

There was a vagueness and a novelty about the lady of Woodlands which had a fascination for her as well as for Ralph.

It was this nebulous unreality, this pretty air of mystery which had at first attracted Ralph; it was so queer in connection with the other side of the girl's character, in which she was sharp-witted and clear-

headed. As an accepted lover he could speak out about it; he could rally Polly on the audacity of her ignorance and innocence.

"You must not really talk like that; people will misunderstand you."

And then as the angry colour rushed into her cheeks, she repeated her old refrain.

"I like to be free—free! No one can be free who is married."

He answered with a low gurgle of laughter. "You couldn't always have continued a sort of virgin princess. Some day or other you would have had to come off your pedestal. Be thankful that it is I—who will not put you through your catechism."

For she had placed both her hands in his, with a confidence in him which touched him, when he first showed a tendency to forget his promise, saying, "You can't expect me to give an account of all my doings. I refuse to be put through a sort of catechism. I trust you, and you must trust me—it is the only way to be happy."

He was too confident in himself to take a large-minded view of the way.

But one day when she burst into tears, having a compassionate and pitiful estimate of her own situation, and exclaiming, as she wept: "You ought to have chosen a soft little obedient thing, who would always be malleable, with nothing cantankerous about her," he was touched as well as amused. She had reduced him to a state of agreeable perplexity; she was not like any woman whom he had ever met before, but there were a thousand poetical charms about her, and her coquetry, which was instinctive and without premeditation, proved to be irresistible.

Ralph's choice of a wife astonished everybody, and made some of the good people in the neighbourhood a little cynical. For Ralph Carlyon seemed to be the last man to rush into marriage with a comparative stranger, unless the explanation of money could be accepted. He had been guilty of no flirtations with other women, and though it was well understood

that he had taken no notice of his father's manœuvring about his cousin, it was equally well known that he had never committed himself to an explicit opinion on the subject. Why, then, should he make such an extraordinary choice, when he had delayed so long, unless, indeed, he was no better than other men, and had been tempted by the bait held out to him by this little upstart from the Colonies? But even that theory did not hold water, for Azalea Deveril's property was known not to be large, and many richer women would have found an eligible *parti* in Ralph Carlyon.

All the Carlyons prided themselves on the possession of backbone, and had a contempt for invertebrate creatures, the present Carlyon being no exception to the rule, and not likely to do a weak or unmanly thing. And to marry a woman of no family at all, the niece of a leather merchant, a girl hailing from the Antipodes, and without sufficient money to make the sacrifice worth while, would have seemed to the county people a proof of flaccidity.

They shook their heads and said little, Miss Carlyon being equally puzzled. "I don't believe in its being real love," she muttered, when Ralph announced his engagement to her. "If you examine your heart you will find it is merely an odd sort of infatuation." And when Ralph only looked at her with an enigmatical smile, as if he were well pleased with himself, she continued, "I am sure that my father would have objected very strongly. What do you know of her life in the Colonies? Everybody acknowledges that it is odd that this divinity should have shut herself up, and then condescended to admit *you* rather than other people."

But Ralph's friendship counted for much, and the good temper which made little of unpleasant incidents, with the faculty of sleep which, in her present state of magnificent health, wiped them all out of Polly's memory, as a sponge wipes out scrawling writing on a slate, counted for more. Mr. Carlyon's *fiancée* fell eagerly into all his wishes. As soon as he explained

that he thought many married people selfish, in imagining that the ties of marriage exonerated them from the responsibilities of kinship, she generously suggested that Phillis should make her home with them. Polly was aware of too much that was wrong in herself not to have a fervent desire to make the best of other people. Phillis sometimes jarred on her, but she managed to ignore the jarring points, gliding easily over them, and only laughing at them when she was by herself.

And when Phillis found that a home would still be offered to her with the brother whom she idolized in her secret heart, she registered a vow to say as little as possible to the discredit of his wife. In future, she would not allow the marriage to be stigmatized as foolish, by people who looked on the surface.

But if Phillis's pride from henceforth wore the garments of humility, and if she kept the arrows sheathed which were ready to be shot out of her quiver at the

interloper who had been bold enough to ensnare her brother, Eleanor's task was a harder one.

"Congratulate me—you at least must have known that this was coming, and I count on my old playmate's sympathy. You and I always stood by each other in the old days when nursery punishments were dreaded; you and I will always be friends," Ralph cried, with a glowing face, pressing the hand of his cousin, as if no love passages (as in truth was the case) had ever passed between them. And though the "old playmate" was more statuesque than usual in manner, she, poor soul, *did* congratulate him on the beauty and generosity of his betrothed, and Eleanor had ever been the one to sing Azalea's praises.

"I said, from the first time I saw her, that she had a good heart. No, you are not blinded by your devotion to her; she will be all that you expect, and more," said Eleanor, returning the warm hand-pressure.

No one guessed that she murmured in her secret heart, "O Lord, how long!" and no one noticed

that the pallor for which she had always been remarkable, so suddenly increased that the tint of her clear-cut features became waxlike, resembling the colouring of those corpses which are exposed, in some foreign cities, before the rites of interment. The same seal of peace was on Eleanor's features as that set on the faces of the quiet dead. But it would have taken keener vision than either Ralph or his sister Phillis possessed, to see that the *bistre* circles had increased beneath the deep-set eyes, and that the corners of the mouth drooped with that smile which was so saintly. Phillis's only observation was, "How little she cares! My father made a mistake. Eleanor is a girl with a distinct vocation—nothing would have induced her to marry!"

And when Eleanor told her quietly, a little while afterwards, that she had made up her mind to carry out a project at which she had dimly hinted at a previous period of her life, and to enter a sisterhood in the English Church, Phillis was not only relieved,

but it was universally said that Miss Hudson had come out in a new character, as if the excessive shyness which had been her bane all her life was now to be put on one side. "For the first time she will be in her proper element," was the general remark about Eleanor, whose new vocation seemed to harmonize and put the finishing touches to all that had been crude or wanting in her character.

So passed the days of the courting time, till the marriage took place at Forest Hill, quietly, as suited a wedding when the bridegroom's people were in mourning. And if Polly was not followed in church by bridesmaids dressed in white, or pretty pages to hold up her dress, and if the seats were not thronged with crowds of people, still the bells were ringing out their chorus, and the bridegroom, with his smiling face had tender lights in his eyes. Some of the folks remarked on the bride's absent manner and the fact that she did not seem half to listen to the service. It was all like a dream—a dream which continued through

the rapture of the honeymoon with its touch of childishness, its feeling of picnicking out in the world and going like children, hand in hand, through a new Arcadia—a garden of Hesperides, which the serpent had not yet entered.

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